WRITING ESSAYS

A guide for students in English and the humanities

Second Edition

Richard Marggraf Turley

Writing Essays

Essays are a major form of assessment in higher education today, and this is a fact that causes some writers a great deal of anxiety. Fortunately, essay writing is a skill that can be learned, like any other. Through precise explanations, this fully updated edition of *Writing Essays* gives you the confidence to express yourself coherently and effectively. It demystifies the entire process of essay writing, helping you to become proficient and confident in every aspect.

Writing Essays reveals the tricks of the trade, making your student life easier. You'll learn how to impress tutors by discovering exactly what markers look for when they read your work. Using practical examples selected from real student assignments and tutor feedback, this book covers every aspect of composition, from introductions and conclusions down to presentation and submission. It also advises you on stress-free methods of revision, helps with exam essays, explains the principles of effective secondary source management and shows you how to engage meaningfully with other critics' views. A new chapter will also guide you through the intricacies of the undergraduate dissertation.

As a full-time university professor, Richard Marggraf Turley counsels students and assesses their work every day, helping him to recognise the challenges that they face. Accessible, concise and full of practical examples, *Writing Essays* is a response to these challenges and will be an invaluable companion for humanities students who wish to improve their grades and become confident in the art of essay writing.

Richard Marggraf Turley is Professor of English Literature at Aberystwyth University. He is the author of various scholarly articles and books on the Romantic poets, as well as three volumes of his own poetry and a novel, *The Cunning House*.

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For Leah and Nils

Since every man whose soul is not a clod
Hath visions, and would speak, if he had loved,
And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.

John Keats
The Fall of Hyperion

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Preface

For many students, 'essay' and 'nightmare' are virtual synonyms. That blank computer screen … the struggle for an idea … those first words! Perhaps the walls are closing in on you right now just thinking about it. But help is at hand. The written assignment is not an arcane branch of metaphysics, or an art that only the lucky few can master. Far from it. So long as a couple of rules are observed, much of the pain can be removed from the entire process of essay composition. This book tells you all you need to know about producing work that will impress even the most critical of readers. So no more late nights locked into the computer cluster, popping caffeine pills, weeping over your keyboard. A new day is about to dawn.

It is easy to appreciate why essay writing has destroyed thousands of autonomic nervous systems in colleges and universities. Current trends in higher education place an ever-increasing emphasis on the written assignment as a means of assessment, and many students find it difficult to cope. As a university lecturer, I see people practically every day who are terribly distressed because they simply don't know how to deliver what their tutors want from a piece of written work. The fact that the majority of students now pay for their education themselves means that not achieving the grades they need (or their parents/guardians

expect) can lead to a sense of guilt, low self-esteem, and frustration. Some students even contemplate dropping out of their courses as a direct result of this pressure. Perhaps I am describing people you know. I could even be describing you, which might be why you are reading this book now.

After counselling some particularly stressed students, I had the idea of composing a short guide to essay writing, which I duly distributed among members of my English Literature classes. The response was incredible: word quickly got around and before long I had students from other departments such as History and Philosophy queueing up at my door for a copy. Through interaction with these first readers, I was able to refine and hone my method. I also expanded the guide, making it more interdisciplinary, so that it now offers what I believe is the most relevant, rounded, up-to-date and accessible advice on essay writing available to students in college or at university (postgraduates working for MA or PhD degrees should also benefit from reading it).

Unlike many study aids, mine works with examples taken from real essays and recent critical articles. In my opinion, an ounce of practice is worth a pound of precept: where other guides can waste precious time and space discussing hypothetical writing situations, I explain in concrete terms precisely what is good or bad about passages from genuine undergraduate work. Moreover, I show how to emulate what is impressive, and how to avoid doing what isn't. This 'hands-on' approach applies at every stage of the assignment – from introductions and transitions, to middle sections and conclusions. My book also gives you 'insider information' on improving style, organizing footnotes, using computers and the Internet, printing out, making the most of the library, revising for exams, and writing exam essays. And rather than asking you to plough through a thick tome, I keep everything strictly to the point, which means that I can be detailed and brief at the same time. Indeed, the keyword in my method is *accessibility*. If you have to study indexes to find the information you need from a guide, it has already failed. I've tried to make the learning process intuitive; if you are not drawn in as soon as you turn the first page, I want to know why!

This book is designed primarily for students of English and History, but will help anyone studying a range of humanities, including Anthropology, Archaeology, Philosophy, Geography, Media Studies, Art History, Cultural Studies, Music, and

Education. In fact, a lot of what I have to say applies to essay writing in any discipline. Similarly, while my advice is aimed first and foremost at people working for a degree, adventurous A-level students will also find *Writing Essays* rewarding. I should clarify from the outset that this book will not *guarantee* you a first; nor will it magically transform you from a poor essay writer into a brilliant one. However, it will help you improve your writing skills substantially, let you into a few 'tricks of the trade', and get you thinking about the actual process of producing a coherent, grammatical, and above all *interesting* essay. Feel free to take or discard elements of what follows, according to what seems most useful or applicable to your needs. Above all, trust in your own abilities: when writing an essay – as with most things in life – there are many ways to skin a cat.

Finally, and to reiterate: the art of essay composition is not a jealously guarded secret, only revealed on full moons to the chosen few. It is merely a skill to be learned, like any other. A study guide that imparts this skill is a timely publication indeed, and writing it has not only been fun, but eminently worthwhile. The project belongs to an honourable and democratic tradition that can be traced back to William Cobbett's radical (and hugely popular) *Grammar of the English Language* (1818), which sought to teach a largely uneducated underclass how to express their meaning 'fully and clearly'. Cobbett's advice was as relevant then as it is now: 'The *only* use of words is *to cause our meaning to be clearly understood*.'

I've written this guide for you, and I hope you get a lot out of it. Your time at university or college should be fun, not a period of inordinate introspection and anxiety. Once you've realized this, the world, as they say, is your onion.

Preface to the second edition

I stand by all that. Of course, when I wrote those paragraphs in 2000 (I was a junior lecturer, only a few years into the job), the higher education landscape was very different. The welcome expansion of access to universities had only just begun, and sizeable student loans – the inevitable consequence, we were assured, of such expansion – were still some way off. While it's true that, following the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, most students were already paying fees at the turn of the millennium,

at £1,000 per year a humanities degree cost roughly a ninth of what 'customers' of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been obliged to shell out since 2012. If many students were stressed fifteen or so years ago at the thought of underachieving, they are truly frazzled now.

In a sense, then, this guide is more pertinent than ever, since it sets out to make the process of drafting and assessing essays as transparent as possible. It should also level the playing field in terms of students' educational background. Whichever school you've come from, and whatever its strengths and weaknesses, this guide gives you all you need to know to communicate your ideas effectively. There's nothing now standing between you and your fulfilled potential.

Assessment regimes have also shifted a little, geared these days towards demonstrating 'progression' through Years 1 to 3. Indeed, most institutions have now introduced longer-form assessment in Year 3, which comes with its own distinct challenges. In response, the second edition of *Writing Essays* adds a brand new chapter on the 8,000-word undergraduate dissertation. By the same token, I've dispensed with the now hilarious sections from the first edition on word-processing, printing, and saving your work regularly to a floppy disk or CD. I've also updated examples from critical sources, and added new examples from student essays to reflect current interests and styles.

I'd like to thank those of you who have been in contact over the years, either by email, stopping me in the corridor, or via the comments sections of Amazon and Goodreads. I've enjoyed the kind words, and have taken your suggestions on board. While the late-90s and early noughties now look, in many respects, like halcyon days in further and higher education, we can still have fun at the end of the twenty-teens. We can still write great essays, and we can still party.

Richard Marggraf Turley

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Chapter 1

How to write introductions

What do you want to say in your essay and *why*?

At school and university, various tutors will no doubt have given you different or even conflicting instructions on how to negotiate this crucial stage in your essay. Don't worry. This just underlines what I was saying in the preface about there being no single way to write essays. Cats skinned, roads Rome. But let's look at a tried and tested method. I call it the 'glorious four', because there are, yes, four elements to it, which present:

1. The key aims and scope of the essay
2. A sense of the critical orthodoxy
3. An outline of your methodology
4. A succinct statement of your argument

In other words, an effective way of setting out your stall is to begin by saying what you wish to explore and indicating the texts you'll be analysing; then (briefly) to identify the prevailing view of other critics in the field (the orthodoxy, which

you may wish to write against); then to indicate your methodology (which might be, say, a feminist or historicist approach); and finally to boil down your own intervention into the debate, preferably to just a sentence or two.

Let's look at these elements in turn. 'The key aims and scope of the essay' ... It sounds a simple enough task, but it presupposes that you actually know what your aims are. Many students begin their essays without nailing this information down, which is a recipe for a disjointed, meandering disaster. If your reader knows *what* you intend to talk about, and most importantly *why*, from the outset, then they have more chance of mentally jumping any gaps you might leave in your argument. So let's assume you're writing an essay on Romantic poet John Keats and his rival, Barry Cornwall. Your topic is these poets' 'popular reception' – that is, how they were received by readers of their day. I'd probably begin along these lines:

> My concern in this essay is to explore how John Keats's style is shaped by moments of strategic retreat from his rival Barry Cornwall's more popular aesthetic. I wish to focus on the public reception of the two men's adaptations of Boccaccio's 'Pot of Basil' story – Keats's 'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil', and Cornwall's *A Sicilian Story*, both published in 1819.

It's not perfect, but it's not a dog's dinner, either. Your aims (your 'concerns') are stated clearly, as is the argument's scope (two long poems). In fact, the above scores highly because it conceptualizes the argument from the get go. By that, I mean the first sentence isn't merely descriptive (e.g. 'I wish to compare Keats's and Cornwall's poetic styles'), but already introduces a big idea (namely, that Keats's decision not to mimic Cornwall's crowd-pleasing style was strategic). I'll be returning to the distinction between conceptualized writing (good) and descriptive writing (usually bad, because inert and static), at several points in this book.

As far as giving a 'sense of the critical orthodoxy' goes, I might make the following noises:

> Traditionally, Romanticists have been inattentive to the influence of Cornwall's work in helping Keats decide what kind of a poet he wished to be. Indeed, Cornwall usually appears

> in standard critiques of Keats, if he appears at all, merely as a footnote to Keats's narrative of precocious, onward maturity.

It wouldn't be a bad idea to name check a couple of scholars and publications guilty of ignoring Barry Cornwall:

> … if he appears at all, merely as a footnote to Keats's narrative of precocious, onward maturity. In stark contrast to his high profile in William Hazlitt's 1824 anthology of Romantic poets, Cornwall is represented by a single sonnet in Jerome McGann's *The New Book of Romantic Verse* (1993), and is not, and has never been, included in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, which in 2012 reached its ninth, expanded incarnation.

We can leave more detailed discussion about Cornwall and Romantic scholarship to the argument as it unfolds.

On, then, to my 'outline of the methodology'. An approach that seems appropriate to the project I'm describing is New Historicism, a theory attuned to the ways in which literary texts are embedded in the wider material culture of their age. Let's fold that element into our 'glorious four':

> This essay adopts an historicist perspective to explore the mutual bearing of Keats and Cornwall in 1819, focusing on the two poets' differently angled participation in the burgeoning print culture of the day.

And finally, a 'succinct statement of my argument' – that is, of my essay's intervention into the debate around Cornwall's influence on Keats:

> I argue that the interaction of Keats and Cornwall – both in its textual and social dimensions – was richer and more mutually transformative than critics have allowed hitherto.

Put those four elements together, and we get an introduction that's actually not bad. At any rate, it's clear, conceptualized and well structured. Let's look at a published example of an introduction that does pretty much what I've been describing: Jane Moore's 'Plagiarism with a Difference: Subjectivity in "Kubla

Khan" and *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*', in *Beyond Romanticism*, ed. Stephen Copley and John Whale (London: Routledge, 1992). Here's Moore's first paragraph (don't worry about the technical terms; just concentrate on how the paragraph is organized):

> In 1927 John Livingston Lowes alleged that parts of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, published in 1796, quietly reappear in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', which was written the following year (Lowes 1978: 148, 545). Lowes's suggestion has set the agenda for much later discussion. My own paper, written from the theoretical perspectives of feminist post-structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, places Coleridge's plagiarism within the field of sexual politics and the politics of desire and power as they are played out in Romantic writing. I propose the thesis that the plagiarism of *A Short Residence* can be read as an attempt by the male Romantic, Coleridge, to fill in the lack which Lacan argues is the condition of subjectivity.
>
> (p. 140)

This is great – in a short space, Moore not only sketches a critical context for Wollstonecraft's *A Short Residence*, moreover one that is specific to the themes she wants to discuss in her own essay; she also tells us what her approach is (feminist poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis), and what her essay adds to the debate on Wollstonecraft. In a few deft moves, Moore informs her reader and engages his or her attention with the promise of an interesting discussion. By making her aims and objectives clear, she also gives her reader a map or compass by which to navigate the rest of the essay. Moore hasn't kept back her best point as some 'prize' for the assiduous reader to discover; she hasn't treated her essay like a detective novel, where the 'solution' is withheld until the last page. Rather, she uses a direct and economical mode of address to communicate from the outset all the information the reader needs to get the most out of the essay.

The introduction is all about setting out your stall – about letting your reader know what to expect, and telling him or her where you are coming from critically. So, let's assume we've been asked to write on images of solitude in Wordsworth's and

Coleridge's poetry. We'll use 'Simon Lee', 'The Ancient Mariner', and 'Resolution and Independence' as our texts, and work up a thesis that solitary figures are closely associated with the psychological impacts of rapid social change in the late eighteenth century – anxiety and alienation. (Again, don't worry if you don't know the poems; just focus on how I organize my ideas.)

> In 1798 Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth published *Lyrical Ballads*, a volume of poems that eschewed 'lofty' neoclassical themes in favour of situations drawn from the lives of rural labourers, 'idiot boys', and 'female vagrants'. *Lyrical Ballads* appeared at a time of intense and rapid social change, when traditional jobs and ways of life were vanishing. Seemingly overnight, many people became virtual anachronisms in their own age. This essay explores Wordsworth's and Coleridge's interest in isolated characters such as the Leech Gatherer in 'Resolution and Independence', the Ancient Mariner, and the culturally marooned Simon Lee, and suggests that for both poets, solitary figures are striking emblems of alienation and disempowerment.

Well, this introduction might not win awards, and would be much improved if I could find a quotation from a literary historian corroborating my view of the frightening pace of social change in the late eighteenth century (accompanied by a footnote, of course). But that notwithstanding, in the passage I tell the reader what my essay seeks to do, make clear my interest in relating literature to the historical period that produced it, and manage to come up with one or two nice turns of phrase (fifteen years after the first edition of this guide, I still like 'solitary figures are striking emblems of alienation and disempowerment'!).

Internal coherency

Read through the paragraph again. Notice how one point moves smoothly and elegantly into the next, in a logical sequence. This sequence, if broken down into units, looks something like this:

1. *Lyrical Ballads* differed from previous volumes of poetry by placing new emphasis on 'lowly' characters such as labourers and vagrants.

→2 Text appeared at an historical juncture characterized by rapid social change, when many traditional jobs and ways of life were disappearing.
→3 Essay focuses specifically on how Wordsworth and Coleridge use solitary figures to explore the plight of those left stranded in those uncertain times.

If the order of the units were rearranged, the introduction would no longer be as effective. Actually, it is a good idea to apply this 'internal coherency' test to your own introductions. I'll be looking at another example of this test a little later.

Useful phrases

One more thing to note. In the last sentence of my introduction, I've used a simple and very convenient phrase for outlining the scope of my essay:

> This essay explores …

Other ways of saying the same thing are:

> In this essay, I wish to investigate/consider/detail …
> This essay examines/demonstrates/contends/proposes that …
> This essay seeks to determine …
> This essay concentrates on …
> My discussion draws into focus …
> This assignment reflects on …
> My concern in this essay is with …

When you come across pithy phrases or expressions in the work of good critics, don't be afraid to 'lift' them for your own use. The chances are that the phrase in question has already been adapted from someone else. Don't lift *ideas*, though. That's plagiarism, and you'll suffer for it.

By the same token, there are certain phrases or formulas it's best to avoid as you would the plague. For example:

> In order to respond to the question, it is first necessary to examine Dudley's position in the Elizabethan court.

I'm sure many of you will recognize the *in order to do X, it is first necessary to do Y* formula. It probably seems like an old friend who's always there for you, through the proverbial thick and the proverbial thin. But while it may be a mainstay of sixth-form essays, it has no place in undergraduate work. It is just too clunky, predictable, and obviously 'A-levelly'. As soon as you fall back on it, the words **'No imagination!'** will begin to flash in your tutor's mind in thirty-foot-tall neon letters.

Express yourself

Before we move on, I'd like to look at one more exemplary introduction, this time from Peter Marks, 'Monitoring the Unvisible: Seeing and Unseeing in China Miéville's *The City & The City*', *Journal of Surveillance Studies*, 11 (2013). (The journal is available to read for free online, and I recommend it highly.)

> Visibility is central to surveillance, as David Lyon makes plain: 'Surveillance is about seeing things and, more particularly, about seeing people' (Lyon 2007: 1). Models based on regimented visibility have underpinned surveillance arrangements and practices, while the titles of Surveillance Studies play on versions of visibility and visualisation: *The Transparent Society* (Brin 1998); *The Glass Consumer* (Lace 2005); *The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility* (Haggerty and Ericson 2006); *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* (Andrejevic 2007), among many others. Given the centrality of visibility to Surveillance Studies, what might the 'unvisible', and the related act of 'unseeing' in China Miéville's *The City & The City*, add to our understanding? How does unseeing fit into broader patterns and forms of monitoring in the novel? How does it affect identity? What is its impact on the designation and control of spaces? As I aim to show, *The City & The City* productively suggests ways of thinking about what surveillance sees and does not see.

Again, this is great. We're given an unambiguous statement of aims, which also outlines the textual scope of the discussion ('As I aim to show, *The City & The City* productively suggests …'), we get a sense of the existing critical field (the reference to Lyon's

work) and orthodoxy (apparent from the titles of 'surveillance studies' books), the grammar is clear throughout, and ideas progress logically. In addition, the prose style is simple but stylish, and there's no disfiguring jargon (the 1980s spawned articles full of flashy but vapid expressions like 'ideological hermeneutics', 'dialectical negotiation', and 'the dialogics of desire'. Do not be tempted to emulate!). I also like the way Marks finds a few finely turned, suggestive phrases, such as 'What is its impact on the designation and control of spaces?' Best of all, the introduction is conceptualized throughout, and indeed focuses on a conceptual crux: namely, the difference between 'invisibility' and 'unvisibility'. (Miéville's stunning novel is set in a world where people from two cities inhabit the same space, but are required consciously to 'unsee' those from the other city.)

A good first paragraph is all about striking the right note, or, to switch metaphors, giving your reader a firm handshake. After all, as the word suggests, an introduction introduces you to someone for the first time. Don't make your reader feel like he or she has just squeezed an uncooked sausage. Remember, it pays to think carefully about your introduction, because it's where your reader forms a first impression of you. And as the titular hero of Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* reminds us: 'First impressions, you know, often go a long way, and last a long time.'

More on sequential logic and saying what you mean

It's time, as Morrissey croons, to turn to a real student essay from a third-year English undergraduate, whom we'll call Dan, although all names in this book have been changed to protect the guilty. By now you should be able to spot what's hot about Dan's introduction, and what's not. His essay discusses Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, and begins thusly (negative reinforcement aside, never use that word in an assignment):

> Marriage in Austen's society was perceived as a functional device far removed from any emotional rhetoric. Marriage was a, 'Social and material contract,' (Evans p46) in which emotion should be subordinated and kept firmly under control. From a purely personal point of view Austen herself proved that a woman, could be, 'Capable of acting independently of men and patriarchal interests.' (Evans p44) I will

> argue however that this notion was not practical to most of the women in Austen's society and certainly remains largely impractical to the protagonists of "Sense and Sensibility".

A lot of things are done well here, but not everything – not by a long stretch. For instance, we ought to clarify (since it seems to have slipped Dan's mind) that the critical reference to Mary Evans is to her book, *Jane Austen and the State* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987). Since Dan quotes from this publication for the first time, a full bibliographical reference needs to go in a footnote (more on this topic in Chapter 7).

Let's look at the passage in more detail now. We can start by rectifying the careless slips in punctuation. Compare the above with the 'tidied-up' version that follows:

> Marriage in Austen's society was perceived as a functional device far removed from any emotional rhetoric. Marriage was a 'social and material contract' (Evans, p. 46), in which emotion should be subordinated and kept firmly under control. From a purely personal point of view, Austen herself proved that a woman could be 'capable of acting independently of men and patriarchal interests' (Evans, p. 44). I will argue, however, that this notion was not practical to most of the women in Austen's society, and certainly remains largely impractical to the protagonists of *Sense and Sensibility*.

See how the flow of the essay has been improved simply by moving a few commas around? Not to put the boot in, but not a single comma remains where Dan originally put it. When you read your essays through, don't just scan for spelling mistakes and awkward expressions, but also for any odd punctuation that will make your tutor's task more gruelling than it need be. I'll look closely at grammar and punctuation in Chapter 5 but, for the moment, I want to draw your attention to one very simple, inviolable rule: *never* put commas immediately before round brackets. Stop it now, and for all time.

Let's take another look at the revised paragraph. Notice how I've altered the page references to Evans's book (see Chapter 7 for a full discussion of this subject). As it stood, 'p46' looks awful. The 'p' is jammed up awkwardly against '46' to produce an ugly jumble of characters. By inserting a full stop and a space, we create

a clearer, visually more appealing reference. Remember, we're not only aiming for grammatical clarity and perspicuity in our essays, but also for *visual* perspicuity. It's part of what universities now call 'employability skills' ('transferable skills' in my day). In the first edition of this guide, I made the point that an essay is a physical object, and that readers will respond to its appearance – if you print yours out on lavatory paper, in minuscule type, without spell-checking or proof-reading it, then your tutor will probably assume as little thought has gone into what it has to say as into its presentation. However, many universities now stipulate that essays are 'handed in' electronically, using such services as Turnitin and SafeAssign. The same rules apply, though – read your department's style sheet and make sure your essay adheres to its strictures *vis-à-vis* line spacing (probably x 2), font size (probably 12) and conventions for citing page numbers (if you're studying English or History, probably 'p', followed by a '.', followed by a space, followed by the number). Student numbers have exploded in recent years, and professors no longer have the time (or the inclination) to decipher tatty, badly presented essays. If you want yours to receive proper attention, make sure it's well presented and easy to read. You'll be repaid for your trouble with better marks.

Back to Dan. I said that some things had been done well. He includes a couple of quotes (though the book he's chosen, while still good, is showing its age – I suspect Dan got to the library long after his peers looted its resources). He also includes a section that locates his discussion within the wider critical debate; there's a sentence, too, telling the reader what his essay seeks to establish. But things could still be improved.

Let's look at each sentence in turn:

> (1) Marriage in Austen's society was perceived as a functional device far removed from any emotional rhetoric.

Apart from the rather sweeping statement about marriage in the late eighteenth century, and the flaccid passive construction (*who* is doing the perceiving, that's what I want to know), this sentence is quite promising. We have two nicely turned phrases in 'functional device' and 'emotional rhetoric' – though I do wonder whether we've sacrificed clarity for a clever turn of phrase, which is never a good trade-off. Does it really make sense to say

that marriage is a 'functional device'? For that matter, what *is* a 'functional device'? What Dan means, but doesn't quite say, is that *financial security, rather than emotional attachment, was often the most important reason for getting married in Austen's social circles*.

Your reader shouldn't have to think around several corners to arrive at the sense of your argument. Be absolutely clear in your own mind what you want to say, and then, and only then, work out the best way of saying it. Finally, check that what you've written reflects what you wanted to say. It sounds obvious, but how many of you actually do this?

We'll move on to the second sentence:

> (2) Marriage was a 'social and material contract' (Evans, p. 46), in which emotion should be subordinated and kept firmly under control.

This just needs a little re-jigging to avoid an awkward use of 'should be', which we could change to 'was' or 'had to be'. The third sentence, however, presents more of a dilemma:

> (3) From a purely personal point of view, Austen herself proved that a woman could be 'capable of acting independently of men and patriarchal interests' (Evans, p. 44).

Here we have a problem with 'sequential' logic, both within the sentence itself, and in the sentence's relationship to the paragraph as a whole. If we were to break the paragraph down into units, just as we did with mine earlier, we would end up with the following:

1 No automatic connection between love and marriage in Austen's day.
→ 2 Evans's quotation that women could in fact live independently from patriarchal interests.
→ 3 Austen's life itself proves this fact.
→ 4 But her novel seems to suggest the opposite was true.

Houston! … But although we've lost an oxygen tank, and part of our service module, this mission's coming home safely. Let's get to work. To start with, *how* does Austen's life prove that women

could live without being fettered to patriarchal interests? We're missing a crucial piece of information – namely, that Austen did not marry. Unless the reader is familiar with the details of Austen's biography, Dan's point just doesn't make sense. In other words, we need to add to the sequence the fact that Austen never married:

1 No automatic connection between love and marriage in Austen's day.
→ 2 Evans's quotation that women could in fact live independently from patriarchal interests.
→ 3 Mention the fact that Austen didn't marry.
→ 4 Austen's own life thus proves Evans's point.
→ 5 But her novel seems to suggest the opposite was true.

Much better!

Staying with Dan's introduction ... we're still on the third sentence and considering the issue of coherence, this time *within* the sentence. Can we really say that '*From a purely personal point of view*, Austen herself proved that a woman could be "capable of acting independently of men and patriarchal interests"'? Er ... no. This is desperate, Dan. But I think I can see what has happened. Dan's mixed up what he *wanted* to say – 'from the point of view of her personal life' – with a similar-sounding expression: 'a personal point of view'. Austen's *personal point of view* has nothing to do with proving whether or not women can live independently from men. But if we consider the proposition *from the point of view of her personal life*, things start to fall into place.

Right, last sentence:

> (4) I will argue, however, that this notion was not practical to most of the women in Austen's society, and certainly remains largely impractical to the protagonists of *Sense and Sensibility*.

It's not immediately clear to me what 'this notion' is supposed to signify. I can see it must have something to do with Evans's contention that women were capable of operating independently from men, but things are a little confusing, aren't they? The reason is that 'notion' is the wrong word. 'Notions' are neither practical nor impractical (whereas, say, 'suggestions' *are*). By 'this

notion', Dan actually means 'this way of living' (i.e. independently from patriarchal interests), which indeed was not practical for many women.

If we wanted to keep this sentence, we would need to rewrite it, thus:

> As I will argue, however, living independently from men was not always practical for women in Austen's society, and certainly remains …

As you can see, making your words say exactly what you intend takes a bit of effort. But it's by no means impossible – just remember that meaning has a tendency to 'slip its leash' if you don't keep a firm grip on it.

Putting it all together

To bring this chapter to a close, and return to our box set, let's have another go at Dan's introduction, paying attention to all the points we've considered:

> In Jane Austen's society, marriage often had less to do with emotional attachment than with financial security. Indeed, Mary Evans notes that marriage was first and foremost a 'social and material contract', in which the emotions were kept firmly under control.[1] But, as Evans also points out, women were, in principle at least, 'capable of acting independently of men and patriarchal interests' (p. 44). The fact that Austen did not marry would seem to bear out this remark. Yet the experiences of the female protagonists in *Sense and Sensibility* suggest that, on the contrary, independence was far from practical for most women. In the following discussion, I want to contend that Jane Austen's life and art present the modern reader with an intriguing contradiction.

It's a lot better. There might still be a few question marks hanging around, but these are now confined to the extent to which we agree with Dan's thesis, rather than centring on issues of basic comprehension. Arguably, choosing two contradictory quotations from the same critic is not the best policy, and at times it is slightly unclear who is arguing against whom. I've had to add 'in principle

at least' in the third sentence to try to get around this predicament. Nevertheless, the reader is now able to engage with what promises to be a stimulating discussion, rather than having to work out what Dan means.

And, really, writing an introduction is as simple as that.

Note:

1 Say **what** you want to talk about and **why** (aims and scope of essay).
2 **Locate** your argument in the critical debate.
3 Check that your ideas progress in a **logical** sequence.
4 Make sure that you always **say** what you **mean**.

Chapter 2

The middle section

Structure and critics

Chapter 2

The middle section is where you make good on the promises of your introduction. No matter how virtuosic, well written, and internally logical your opening paragraph is, in the middle section you have to *deliver*. As with all areas of essay composition, there are things to do and things to don't, and once you know what these are you'll feel a lot happier. So read on, Macduff!

I have divided 'The middle section' into two chapters. The first (this one) looks at *structure*, and shows you how to organize your thoughts into an intellectually mobile and energetic argument. I'm also going to talk in this chapter about how and when to use critics – even, or *especially*, when their views contradict your own. The second, focused on *linkage*, is concerned with argumentative movement and momentum within this larger structure, and explains how to transition smoothly between sentences, paragraphs, and sections.

Reading the question and structuring your argument

A good undergraduate essay needs a good structure. Sorry to be prescriptive, but it just does. This rule affords no exceptions. If you don't think about structure, you will almost certainly end up with a sprawling, lurching, sporadic, exasperating argument, that will neither convince nor persuade. Structural problems often start not with the essay itself, but with a flawed approach to the question. Students dive in without making sure they know precisely what it is they've been asked to do. They seize a few key terms and head off into what they think is the sunlight, but which frequently turns out to be the headlamps of an oncoming juggernaut.

Spend more time on, and with, the question; often, it will point you towards the most felicitous way of organizing your essay. Let's explore this idea using a typical humanities-type essay question, which asks us to discuss a poetic genre called 'dramatic monologue':

> 'The Victorian dramatic monologue, as exemplified by Tennyson and Browning, involves a retreat from the Romantic lyric "I" into the mask of persona.' Discuss.

The format will probably be horribly familiar to you. It presents you with an unacknowledged quotation, followed by an ominous invitation to discuss. 'Discuss what?' – 'Help!' – 'Medic!' But there's no need to panic. The question, if it's well conceived, will possess a clear, logical internal structure that 'resonates' at a particular frequency. Before we put finger-tips to keyboard, we should listen carefully; in that way, we'll find a complementary structure around which to base our answer.

Let's begin by considering some of those keywords. What is meant by 'dramatic monologue'? In the hands of Victorian poets Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, the phrase refers to a poem written from a first-person perspective (e.g. Tennyson's 'Tithonus', which begins 'I wither in thine arms'), where the 'I' is not (on first glance, at least) co-identical with the author (or the implied author), but is rather a persona, often a mythical or historical figure. In 'Tithonus', then, the 'I' who speaks is not (or not unproblematically) 'Tennyson', but rather the mythological personage from the poem's title. In this respect, the poem differs

from the earlier Romantic lyric, where we're encouraged to see the 'I' of, say, Percy Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', as standing in for the Romantic author him or herself.

We'd better remind ourselves of our task:

> 'The Victorian dramatic monologue, as exemplified by Tennyson and Browning, involves a retreat from the Romantic lyric "I" into the mask of persona.' Discuss.

Shh. Listen. Can you hear that, for all the technical terms, the question has a very simple A–B structure? It merely invites us to compare (A) Romantic first-person poems with (B) first-person Victorian poems (i.e. 'as exemplified by Tennyson and Browning'). All we are being asked to do is consider the development from 'I' poems of the Romantic period (roughly 1790–1820) to 'I' poems of the early Victorian period (1830s and 1840s). It wouldn't make much sense, then, if we were to look first at Tennyson's and Browning's use of 'I', and *then* go back to see what was different about their forerunners. This would stress the Romantic part of the task, and disturb the question's chronological 'frequency'. Also, since Tennyson and Browning are the named writers in the question, our emphasis should be on them, rather than on their Romantic precursors. In other words, we should begin by looking briefly at a few first-person lyric poems from the Romantic period, and then see what was different about Tennyson's and Browning's dramatic monologues. The question even tells us what particular aspect of difference we should focus on: the use of the persona as a 'mask'. We should also pay attention to the keyword 'retreat', a loaded term, which offers us a conceptual way in to the essay.

This isn't meant to be a lecture on Victorian poetry, so I won't bore you by saying that Romantic poets like Shelley want to be identified with the 'I' of grand, histrionic statements such as: 'I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!' (the more personal and 'genuine' the experience being recounted, the more 'Romantic' the poem). I also won't try your patience by explaining that, conversely, Tennyson doesn't wish to risk being identified too closely with the 'I' of *his* first-person monologues, since he uses several of them to mourn the death of his closest university friend, and possibly lover, Arthur Hallam – the dedicatee of *In Memoriam, A. H. H.* (the Victorians policed heteronormativity rigorously). And I

won't expand on how, by using the mask of persona in dramatic monologues, Tennyson finds a way to express his love for Hallam publicly, while protecting his reputation in a censorious age. All I *will* say is that the middle section of an essay answering our question on Tennyson and Browning could profitably adopt the following broad structure:

A. Discuss Romantic first-person perspective ('I') poems, drawing attention to some defining features.

B. Discuss in more detail two or three of Tennyson's and Browning's 'I' poems, explaining how and why these writers departed from, inflected, or subverted, the Romantic tradition they inherited.

Within this framework there will be plenty of room for incorporating critical opinion, as I will suggest in a moment, for agreeing or disagreeing with the statement, and for developing alternative accounts of the emergence of dramatic monologue. One might, for example, want to take issue with the notion that the transition from a Romantic 'I' to a Victorian 'I' constitutes a 'retreat'; alternatively, one might wish to challenge the idea that the persona acts as a 'mask' for the author. Whatever the case, our broad A–B structure, suggested by the question itself, remains an accommodating frame within which to explore the terms and scope of the question. Finding this structure won't make the essay write itself, but it will help you to write it with greater ease.

Using critics

Some students consider it a point of honour to write all their essays without alluding to a single critic, or digital resource more prestigious than ScrollyNotes.com (domain available at time of writing). Whether this is due to misplaced faith in their own abilities, or sheer delinquency, I'm never entirely sure. But there's only one loser in the equation (hint: it's not other critics). By neglecting to engage with those who are working at the forefront of their fields, by not staging conceptualized encounters with experts, you forfeit opportunities to develop your critical vocabulary, style, and argumentative skills. You also risk presenting ideas as if they were new to the world, fresh emerged from the

Mediterranean Sea, like Venus sizzling on her shell, whereas articles or indeed whole books might already have been devoted to them.

'No man is an island', said John Donne. This is patently true in the sense that one would be hard-pressed to push someone out to sea and live on them. But it's also true in so far as we need each other's views and opinions to develop our own. I often show students an image of a smooth, straight conduit carrying water across a desert, then ask them what it is. I get many suggestions, but they're always wrong. The answer is 'an essay with no critics in it'. Next, I show them a vigorous stream, tumbling down the mossy Welsh hills, with boulders in it. The things of most interest, I point out, take place around the rocks, where the water is bubbling and aerated – where it's 'in spate', to use the technical term. The rocks, of course, are critics. This stream is more engaging than the pipe-like conduit, because the water has to make its way around the boulders, negotiating a route, which – without pushing things too far – is analagous to our encounters with other ideas and interpretations. We need to keep our essay 'in spate'.

University departments are usually transparent about the criteria by which their professors assess essays (try saying those last three words after a night out). Take a look at your departmental handbook: I can pretty much guarantee these marking criteria will include 'evidence of engagement with the critical debate', or some such formulation, as one of the prerequisites for achieving an essay grade in the 2.1 range or higher.

Now that we've established *why* we use criticism, let's think about *how* we use it. We certainly don't want to allow our ideas to be swamped by others' takes on things. And by the same token, we don't want to be overly synthetic. (There are few things worse than essays that lollop from one critical summary to another, before adding 'On balance, I agree with X' and promptly keeling over.) Critics exist for four reasons, and in each case *you* should be in control:

1. to provide support or authorization at crucial points in your argument;
2. to be disagreed with as a means of developing your material;
3. to act as sounding boards for your ideas;
4. to act as springboards for your ideas.

The critic as support

We'll begin with using critics, experts and authorities to shore up your own argument:

> The knowledge that all online activities are subject to state eavesdropping encourages internet users to modify their behaviour in subtle ways, and to conform to increasingly narrowly defined norms. As the inventor of the World Wide Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, points out, government spying has a 'chilling effect, where people don't use facilities that they could have used because of a nameless fear of something happening to them' (*Guardian*, 22 November 2013).

I've used Berners-Lee's interview to underpin and lend credibility to my own argument about the dire effects of mass surveillance. I am – in this regard, at least – in control.

Disagreeing with critics

A point of critical contention can be used to open up a discussion. Take a look at the following passage:

> In his recent article '"Strange Longings": Keats and Feet', in *Studies in Romanticism*, Richard Marggraf Turley takes cynical (mis)readings of theory, in this case Freudian, to ludicrous extremes. To say that Keats's sexuality was 'boyish' is one thing; to say that a central figure in British cultural heritage was a foot fetishist is quite another. Evidently, Marggraf Turley's thesis is intended as a joke, but it is a bad one. The problem lies in a patent misunderstanding of Keats's humour, which …

Ouch! But the point to take is that 'outraged from Tunbridge Wells' has used resistance to my authoritative view on John Keats's foot fetishism to open up and develop his own discussion of the poet's humour.

The critic as 'sounding board'

One technical meaning of 'sounding board' refers to the thin wooden board over which piano strings are strung to amplify them; a soundboard works by coupling the strings' acoustic

energy to the air. Says Wikipedia. A sounding board can also be placed over or behind a lectern to reflect the speaker's voice forward. Colloquially, a sounding board is someone you test your ideas against, and this usage borrows from ideas both of amplication and reflection. Enough with the etymology already. The point is, critics make ideal sounding boards; indeed, the process of bouncing ideas off them until you arrive at a satisfactory intellectual position is part and parcel of fashioning a lively, discursive essay. 'Part and parcel' – now there's another interesting expression. Anyway, let's look at how Amanda tests her ideas against an Emily Brontë expert:

> We might go further to suggest that Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* represents a concerted investigation into 'learned' cruelty in domestic settings. That is, the novel explores ways in which patterns of cruelty are internalized and reproduced by family members. For instance, within the 'family unit' of Hindley, Heathcliff, and Hareton, sadistic behaviour is passed on from one member to the other. Jan Theiling's influential reading of the novel, however, resists this view. In *Violence and the Victorian Novel* (London: Witz, 2015), Theiling argues that cruelty in *Wuthering Heights* is 'predicated on utter randomness, with no meaning attached to it – it is beyond the author's control, and that is why it is so chilling' (p. 32). Certainly, such infamous episodes as the scene in Chapter 17 where Hareton hangs puppies from a chairback might seem to fall into the category of random, meaningless cruelty. Nevertheless, Theiling underplays the extent to which Brontë purposefully develops the theme of symbolic cruelty in her novel. Indeed, in *Brontë's Passion* (Leeds: Keiner, 2011), Nina Davies suggests that 'the study of premeditated, systematic cruelty' is precisely the author's 'principal objective' (p. 87). While Davies possibly goes too far in the opposite direction, she at least recognizes the contours of Brontë's project vis-à-vis the treatment of cruelty. This recognition is crucial to developing a more nuanced understanding of the novel, as I now wish to elaborate.

This is impressive writing: clear, balanced, closely argued. By exchanging views with other critics, taking what seems useful and rejecting what does not, Amanda's own position – that cruelty

is treated purposefully by Brontë, and is precisely *not* 'beyond [her] control' – crystallizes powerfully by the end of the 'sounding board' session.

The critic as 'springboard'

Finally, let's take an idea from a critic and use it as a springboard into our own discussion. So you're a Film Studies student. You're reading Donna Haraway's manifesto, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), and encounter her intriguing notion that cyborgs are emancipated from patriarchal history, since:

> The cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense … The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust.
>
> (pp. 150–1)

Then you start thinking about the renegade androids (cyborg 'replicants') in *Blade Runner*, the film version of Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* At the beginning of the film, the Tyrell Corporation's Nexus-6 androids – physically all-but indistinguishable from humans – have been banished from Earth to live on Mars. A small group, led by alpha-android Roy Batty, escape and return to Earth with the intention of seeking out their 'creator', Dr Eldon Tyrell. Although Haraway's cyborg theory argues that cyborgs have no yearnings for origins, it dawns on you that Batty's journey could be interpreted precisely as an attempt to return to origins – to the Garden of Eden (in this case the Garden of Eldon). You might draft something along these lines:

> Whereas Haraway's cyborgs are empowered through not being shackled to patriarchal origin myths, Dick's recalcitrant androids seem to be saying that such emancipation is not enough. Finally, the deep-seated desire to understand one's beginnings, complicated by suspicions that the creator has betrayed them, drive the Nexus-6 models to return to Eden/Eldon and risk violent death at the hands of the blade runners whose job it is to 'retire' replicants. For Dick, the questions gnawing at Batty and his renegades, and the desire to

> recover and understand their orgins, are part and parcel of what it means to be alive. In fact, such desires define the quality of being human more meaningfully than the blade runners' Voigt-Kampff test, which measures pupil fluctuation in subjects suspected of being replicants.

Without Haraway, you might not have been nudged into this fruitful line of thought, might never have considered *Blade Runner* as a 'return to Eden' fantasy.

The counter-argument

Just consider, you're halfway through a Media Studies essay on the history of British television, and are arguing that the so-called 'golden age' of TV in the mid to late 1970s is a fabrication created by nostalgic fifty-somethings. Alongside the best of recent programming, such as 'The Tudors' and 'Gavin and Stacey', often-lauded 'golden-age' series like 'George and Mildred' and 'The Good Life' pale into insignificance, you insist. And then you remember truly great shows like 'Fawlty Towers', 'The Liver Birds', 'You and Me', 'Dr Who' (with Tom Baker, of course), and 'The Professionals'. Not only that, but there are plenty of works of criticism in the library to tell you exactly *why* these were great programmes. Oh dear … Drawing attention to these series and books would scuttle your argument, you fear, and consequently you decide to ignore them altogether.

Now it might come as a surprise, but you'd be better off doing exactly the opposite and conceding the existence of alternative views, or 'counter-arguments', to your own:

> To this point, I have argued that increased budgeting, rationalization, and an improved support system for emerging writers led to a steady rise in the overall standard of programming on British television since the mid-nineties. However, it would be misleading to suggest that the idea of a 'golden age' of TV in the late 1970s is entirely due to rose-tinted nostalgia. As Edward Foreman points out in *British Television: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Quark, 2012), 'series such as "Fawlty Towers" and "The Good Life" set new standards for British comedy against which current writers and producers should still feel obliged to measure themselves' (p. 76). While Foreman is right

> to emphasize the achievement of these earlier programmes, it is debatable whether they ought to remain an acid test for modern television, which responds to different social, cultural and political conditions, and must also compete with content produced for, and by, the YouTube generation.

By showing your readers the counter-argument, you gain their trust. Besides, you may find that your own standpoint remains valid, or is even strengthened through comparison with those of other critics. Equally important, you prove to your professor that you've done the legwork and researched your topic thoroughly. A one-sided argument impresses no one. From the reader's point of view, it's far more exciting to see evidence for *and* against something. In fact, that's the only way anyone can judge how persuasive your argument really is.

Experienced writers routinely acknowledge alternative arguments, since they know that, paradoxically, such strategies help to authorize their views. There's a good example in the journal *Romanticism*, 20 (2014) by Kenneth R. Johnson, whose younger self provides the counter-argument:

> It is easy to regard Wordsworth's reticence as cowardly, or at least overly cautious – as I myself regarded it, in *The Hidden Wordsworth* of 1998. But now I think Wordsworth was right [to suppress a political satire in 1795], in the larger contexts I have explored since then (*Unusual Suspects: Pitt's Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s*, Oxford, 2013).

Johnson's gambit (and elegant volte-face) is an effective way of drawing the reader into his discussion.

I want to leave you with a final example of how allowing readers access to counter-arguments helps win them over. In his classic study, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1968), E. P. Thompson argues for a revised history of the massacre of radicals and protesters at St Peter's Fields in Manchester on 16 August 1819 by government troops – the so-called battle of 'Peterloo', in ironic reference to Waterloo. Thompson asserts that the massacre was not a 'regrettable accident', but the result of a premeditated plan to disperse the meeting with force and thus send a bloody message to other potential

dissidents. Thompson, however, doesn't balk at acknowledging some cogent opposing perspectives:

> This [Thompson's belief that the government had decided in advance to break up the meeting with troops] has to be said again, since it has been suggested recently [by Donald Read] that Peterloo was an affair, in part unpremeditated, in part arising from the exacerbated relations in Manchester itself, but in no sense any part of a considered policy of Government repression. (p. 749)

While obviously disagreeing with Read, Thompson doesn't dismiss his antagonist's entire thesis out of hand. In fact, he praises the remainder of Read's *Peterloo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1947), as a study that 'does much to place the event in its local context' (p. 749). Such manoeuvres – and they are manoeuvres (Read is damned with faint praise) – have the effect of showing Thompson in a better light. Seeing him take account of opposing views, readers are more likely to trust his own interpretation of events. As soon as we sense an author is trying to hide, manipulate or fabricate evidence, the Nixon/Blair effect kicks in, and we find ourselves reacting instinctively against self-serving, disingenuous arguments.

Note:

1. Work out how the **question** is structured before deciding how to organize your essay.
2. **Engage** with the critical debate, without being swamped by it.
3. **Acknowledge** counter-arguments.

Chapter 3

More on the middle section
Linkage

Chapter 3

Many students find it difficult to move smoothly between ideas in their essays, even though awkward transitions mean a bumpy ride for the reader. Indeed, when you are deep in thought, you might not even realize you *have* finished one point and started another, let alone have considered how best to do it. Worry not, gentle reader. In bite-sized chunks, this chapter explains the mechanics of linking sentences and paragraphs, ideas and sections. Not only is linkage easier than you might think; once you get the hang of it, you'll be amazed at how much more integrated and polished your essays suddenly appear.

Linking ideas and sentences

> The customer entered the shop. He wanted to speak to the manager about some faulty goods. The manager was out.

Now the beginning of the above anecdote may make perfect sense, but it is annoyingly fitful, and

difficult to follow the sense of the passage across the full stops. We lose momentum with each step we take. Compare the revised version:

> The customer entered the shop to speak to the manager about some faulty goods. However, the manager was out.

Much better. We have a greater degree of integration and have built up some logical momentum. Note that I've achieved this transformation without altering any of the ideas in the passage; I've merely made the relationship of the various elements to each other more obvious, using link words such as 'to' and 'however'. We could go a step further:

> The customer entered the shop to speak to the manager about some faulty goods, but the manager was out.

Even better – slicker and quicker! It's worth getting linkage and logical momentum right, because it speeds up your readers' trajectory through your argument.

So how does this example translate into university or college writing? Compare the following two passages, and ask yourself which is more effective:

> We are used to associating Winchester's water-meadows with the composition of Keats's sunset ode, 'To Autumn'. Keats journeyed for the conceptual perspectives of his poem to the view from St Giles's Hill, looking west over the city.

or:

> We are used to associating Winchester's water-meadows with the composition of Keats's sunset ode, 'To Autumn'. However, as this essay suggests, Keats actually journeyed for the conceptual perspectives of his poem to the view from St Giles's Hill, looking west over the city.

I hope you chose the latter (link elements underlined). Measured in units of ICV (internet cat videos), the pleasure that markers derive from clear linkage in student essays is off the scale, so I'll end this section with some helpful linking phrases:

Yet
But
However
Nevertheless
Despite
Bearing that in mind
Beyond that
Because of this
For instance
For example
Conversely
While
In order to
Instead of
Having said that
In contrast
On the contrary
On the other hand
Perhaps
Moreover
Furthermore
As well as
By the same token
As a matter of fact

Some to use with caution:

Clearly
Indeed
In fact

And a few it's best to avoid altogether:

Basically
Thus
Therefore

Linking paragraphs and sections

We've been studying linkage within and between sentences; now we are going to move up in scale to look at paragraphs and sections. In any essay, the larger or 'macro'-argument will almost certainly comprise a series of smaller sections, or 'micro'-arguments. These may *seem* self-contained, and each might address discrete points or themes, but each section should work towards establishing and developing your wider proposition. For your mini-sections to add up to an ungainsayable whole, however, they have to be linked together properly. Weak spots in essays are frequently to be found not in individual points, *per se*, but in the gaps between points – that is, not in the things you say, but in the things you *don't*. If you omit to build bridges between sections in your essay, your argument will appear disjointed. The

reader will struggle more and more to retain the sense of your argument, and eventually give up.

Several good examples of transitions can be found in Scott McEathron's essay, 'Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry', which appeared in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54 (1999), 1–26. To put you in the picture, McEathron explores 'the relationship between Wordsworth's rustic poetry and the so-called "peasant" and "working-class" verse of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' (p. 1). The larger question posed is whether or not Wordsworth is justified in his claim to be the sole poet of 'low and rustic life' (as the mighty-browed bard puts it in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*).

In the section of the essay I want to home in on, McEathron scrutinizes the work of a few earlier, and arguably more 'genuine', rustic poets. First up is the much-maligned eighteenth-century 'thresher-poet', Stephen Duck. In this particular micro-argument, McEathron discusses how many literary reviewers of the day refused to take 'low-born' poets like Duck seriously. In the micro-argument that immediately follows, McEathron reveals that not *all* literary critiques of peasant poetry in the late eighteenth century, however, boiled down to snide comments about authors' personal hygiene and indifferent education. On the contrary, things began to change. Henry Mackenzie, for example, wrote a favourable and influential review of his countryman, Scots dialect poet, Robert Burns (1759–1796), in which the matter of Burns's low birth was explicitly described as irrelevant to his poetical merit. But – and this is my point – McEathron uses a linking passage to present his material as effectively as possible:

> Overlapping with these satirical dismissals of peasant poetry, however, and gathering steam late in the century, was a strain of serious-minded, conscientious criticism that recognized that the habitual critical default to a peasant-poet stereotype threatened the credibility of poet and reviewer alike. (p. 8)

This is very skilful writing. The passage quite literally 'overlaps' the old and new points, moving into the new section (about 'serious-minded, conscientious criticism') via a recapitulation of the old one (about 'satirical dismissals of peasant poetry' by prejudiced critics). You'll see what I mean more clearly, perhaps, if I present McEathron's discussion as a schematic (see p. 30).

Without such a 'transition', the move between micro-arguments would be like shifting gear without first depressing the clutch.

Micro-argument 1
Culturally snobbish reviewers played on popular stereotypes of peasant poets to dismiss their writing. (E.g. attacks on Stephen Duck.)

Transition section
While many reviewers continued to dismiss low-born writers, the situation began to change …

Micro-argument 2
Reviewers began to review in a more responsible fashion; the circumstances of an author's birth, while impossible to forget entirely, were increasingly seen as irrelevant to assessing the poetry itself. (E.g. Mackenzie's review of Burns.)

'Signposts'

It is paramount to reassure your reader that you are in control of your argument. It is *your* discussion, after all, so don't leave people to wander around in it like lost things. Rather, lead them through each section, letting them know exactly what is happening as you do it. For an example of a writer who does this job well, I'd like to look at an essay called 'Art and Audience' by Nick Zangwill, published in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (1999), 315–32. It's a racy piece that questions whether a work of art necessarily has, or even needs, a relationship with an audience. The informal tone of Zangwill's essay might be a touch *too* familiar for some, and I'd be wary myself of including

quite so many personal interjections, but the important thing to note is how hard Zangwill works to avoid losing his reader. In fact, you'd be hard pressed to get lost in Zangwill's argument, because although it twists and turns like a twisty-turny thing in a particularly twisty (not to mention turny) mood, it's been scrupulously well signposted.

What do I mean by a 'signpost'? There's a good example on the first page of Zangwill's article:

> I shall come back to some of these distinctions. [...] But we might as well note straightaway that ...

As you can see, signposts are phrases or short passages that tell the reader what is happening, or about to happen, in terms of argument or in the way an essay is organized. As to *why* we signpost essays ... Perhaps it would help if I asked you to visualize Zangwill's argument on the relationship between art and audience as a tangled forest. Go on – humour me.

There are many paths weaving through this forest; some of them intersect, some are dead-ends, and some lead into dangerous quagmires. Undaunted, Zangwill heads off into the forest. As he walks through the undergrowth, he stops to examine interesting-looking flowers, ferns, or mushrooms; he pauses to compare fauna from different parts of the wooded area; he studies the wildlife. Since he wishes to share what he has discovered with other people, he prepares a trail for them to follow. And because the forest is tangled and the path winding, he erects signposts at potentially confusing places. These will guide and reassure fellow walkers, as well as giving them useful tips about the things they are going to see. With that picture in mind, take another look at Zangwill's first signpost:

> I shall come back to some of these distinctions. [...] But we might as well note straightaway that ...

Zangwill tells walkers (1) that they're about to change paths, even though they haven't finished looking at all the interesting things on the present route yet; and (2) not to worry, because there'll be an opportunity to return in a while. All along the trail, Zangwill puts himself into his readers' shoes; he knows exactly at what stage in his discussion they will need help and encouragement.

He *never* leaves them to find their own way from one part of his argument to another.

Some signposts you can erect as you write. Some you will need to knock up later, since it will only really become clear where they need to be placed once your essay is in the proof-reading stage and you gain a clearer overview of how your argument reads.

Experienced writers routinely help their readers out as their discussion develops or becomes more complex. Take the following extract from Thomas McFarland's essay, 'Coleridge: Prescience, Tenacity and the Origin of Sociality', *Romanticism* 4.1 (1998), 40–59:

> Whatever Coleridge was, a chameleon he was not. Indeed, it might even be said that the whole point of this paper is to demonstrate how baseless is such a charge. No one has ever been more constant in his opinions or more tenacious in his intellectual attitudes and viewpoints than was Coleridge. But he has in recent years been enveloped in a miasma of misconception, and grossly, even ludicrously mistaken views have sometimes prevailed.
>
> To dispel, or begin to dispel, that miasma of misconception, therefore, an extended concluding example must be joined to the three already summoned. It will serve to illustrate still a fourth aspect of Coleridge's all-pervading intellectual tenacity.
>
> (p. 51)

I like this passage: it's gutsy, bad-tempered, and shoots from the hip. A 'miasma of misconception' – what a great way of saying that other Coleridge critics have got things completely wrong! Ditto 'ludicrously mistaken views'. But the primary purpose of the passage is to inform the reader that they will shortly be studying a fourth example of Coleridge's intellectual tenacity:

> ... an extended concluding example must be joined to the three already summoned.

In other words, the passage, for all its attitude and 'presence', is essentially a signpost, albeit a very entertaining one.

Changing direction

As long as you explain *when* and *why* you are doing something new, your argument can dash around in all directions while performing the 'Numa Numa' dance (*Mai ai hee* ... sing along!), and still keep your reader with you.

The following example is taken from an essay on Marcel Duchamp's response to the 'machine age', written by an Art History student called Anna:

> To this point we have discussed Duchamp's response to the machine age specifically in terms of the scientific aspect of the age. I now wish to consider the influences of philosophical thought and literature of the time.

Apart from the fact that the sentence would benefit from having 'the scientific aspect of the age' shortened to 'scientific aspects', it's a well-written transition that clearly announces the author's intention to head off in a new direction.

While you certainly should not insert a clarificatory statement after every other paragraph – this would be torturous to read – it is in your own interest to give your reader a little help at key junctures in your argument. Anyone can write an essay that quickly loses its readers (poststructuralist literary theorists do it all the time). It takes real skill, though, to keep your reader with you all the way.

We'll look at one more example of a signpost placed before an imminent change of tack. It's taken from an essay that uses Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, *North and South* (1855), to explore the representation of women's agency in nineteenth-century novels. Jane, who is studying English Literature, has just argued that the association of the female protagonist Margaret Hale with domesticity emerges as a *leitmotiv*. Now Jane is preparing to start a new section in which she wants to inaugurate a discussion of the novel's *male* characters:

> If Margaret is repeatedly associated with a gendered domestic sphere, and effectively silenced, the novel's male protagonists of both classes – Thornton, the mill-owner and Nicholas Higgins, high-minded trade unionist – are shown to represent a vocal 'masculine realm of competitiveness and aggression'.

Looking past the phrase 'are shown to', which is weak (because couched in the passive), and actually superfluous, we find a plain but effective linking phrase – 'If' – that neatly connects the new section to the old.

Prêt à porter

I'll end this chapter with a collection of 'ready-to-wear' linking sentences and phrases. Perhaps you'll find one that fits or can be adapted to your particular needs.

Changing direction

(a) While my discussion to this point has focused primarily on X, we ought to devote some time to considering Y.

(b) Whereas this situation held true for foreign policy under X, the political landscape changed significantly under Y, as I will now outline.

(c) At this stage in our argument, it is appropriate to voice the following question: how far can we …

(d) At the beginning of this essay, it was my contention that X, Y, and Z constituted a defining trade-environmental nexus. Before we proceed, I wish to clarify that …

(e) If, as I suggested in my earlier overview, shopkeepers had reason to be disgruntled in the winter of 2008, the first half of the new decade saw levels of spending unrivalled since the late-90s. I'd now like to look more closely at the period 2010–2015.

Linking a point to critical opinion

(f) My contention that Keats's poetry stages performances of boyishness to disrupt and contest mature power receives important, if not unequivocal, support from Ima C. Ritic. In her recent book, *Juvenile Delinquents: Keats, Shelley, Chatterton* (London: Nosuchpress, 2015), Ritic suggests that …

(g) As we have seen, David Evans offers a suggestive overview of structures of authority in King Francis's court, but he neglects to take into full account the extent to which preferment of family members influenced court appointments. That the practice was more rife than Evans allows can be established from a glance at the web of familial relationships connecting office holders between 1746 and 1773. Out of seven Royal Chancellors in this period, five were directly related to the King. From nine Court Jesters, no less than seven were …

Linking two poems

(h) Felicia Hemans's well-known poem 'Casabianca' offers a devastating, moving critique of masculine codes of behaviour, dramatizing a son's fatal loyalty to his father's word (law of the father). It is left to another of Hemans's parent-child poems, the equally affecting 'The Image in Lava', to recuperate a more positive version of parental love.

Linking two events

(i) While the Cato Street Conspiracy to blow up parliament in February 1820 took on the character of a farce, the massacre of innocent protesters at St Peter's Fields in Manchester six months earlier played out as nothing short of a national tragedy. The event, which came to be known as the Battle of Peterloo, with ironic echoes of Waterloo, marked a watershed in the struggle between government and radical opposition.

Note:

1 **Link** sentences, paragraphs, and sections.
2 **Signpost** your argument clearly.
3 **Tell** your reader when you're about to change direction.

Chapter 4

How to write conclusions

Chapter 4

If introductions are all about making a first impression, conclusions are about leaving a last impression, which is equally important. Apart from your bibliography, the conclusion is the last thing your tutor will read before a mark is entered that will live on in your degree transcript forever. With the conclusion, as with all stages of the essay, there are things to do and things to don't.

Let's begin with a distinction between *summary* and *discursive* conclusions. The first, as the name suggests, is retrospective in character, and functions to gather together the ideas developed over the course of your essay. It's useful when you're trying to persuade your reader, and can help 'prove' your case or clinch a larger point. The 'discursive' conclusion, by contrast, continues developing your argument until the last full stop. It tends to work well with assignments that are wide-ranging in scope and are perhaps more conversational in tone. We'll consider both types of conclusion in more detail.

'SUMMARY' CONCLUSIONS

Weighing up your own argument

If you are writing an essay that sets out to establish something reasonably concrete – that, say, governments toady up to popular newspapers, or mass surveillance has a chilling effect on whole populations – it's a good idea to use your final paragraph to weigh up the main arguments rehearsed in your discussion. Through distillate restatement, the reader gets a quick 'refresher' of the salient points, and you get an opportunity to draw your best sections into clear focus one last time. Remember to end on an evaluative note, though, rather than descriptive. Here's a summary-style conclusion from an English student named Katy, whose essay explores two differently inflected critical approaches to the work of Romantic poet, John Keats (1795–1821). The first, 'traditional' view argues that Keats's poetry displays his desire to transcend the world, to disengage from contemporary politics and 'real life'; the second, 'materialist' approach asserts that, on the contrary, Keats's work is deeply embedded in the events and debates of its day. Katy's final paragraph reads as follows:

> As I have shown, both schools of criticism under consideration provide inadequate accounts of Keats's poetry. Traditional approaches fail to consider the influence of society and politics on the imagination (the unconscious 'place' of inspiration Keats inhabited during his composition), while materialist criticism does not take into account the possibility that at times Keats may only have been obliquely (subconsciously) affected, if at all, by what he saw around him. However, as I have demonstrated in my essay, the respective opposing stances adopted by these critiques can be resolved into a view of Keats that both recognizes the influence of specific historical conditions on his compositional process and, at the same time, acknowledges the role of the transcendent and transcending poetic imagination.

This is a pleasure to read. In her essay, Katy has resisted plumping for one or the other approach as a 'cure-all' solution to the challenges of reading Keats. Instead, she identifies blinkered

perspectives in both schools of criticism. Her conclusion broadly reiterates what her larger discussion has illustrated in detail. Namely, that: (1) traditional views of Keats as an isolated genius, immured or oblivious to the realities of day-to-day life, fail to recognize the profound influence political events had on his writing; (2) more recent historicist or materialist accounts, which argue literature should be understood in terms of specific historical contexts, do not always appreciate that the influence of turbulent political times on Keats was often indirect and nebulous, rather than immediate and obvious. After scrutinizing the merits and de-merits of each methodology, Katy concludes that a more integrated reading of Keats is possible.

The style, too, is impressive. Take another look at the last sentence:

> However, as I have demonstrated in my essay, the respective opposing stances adopted by these critiques can be resolved into a view of Keats that both recognizes … and, at the same time, acknowledges …

I like the phrase 'resolved into'. It's really just another way of saying 'can be combined', but it's more interesting and betokens a developed and sophisticated critical vocabulary.

Improvements? I would delete the word 'subconsciously' in parentheses halfway through the paragraph because it adds very little, and perhaps even confuses matters:

> … while materialist criticism does not take into account the possibility that Keats may only have been obliquely (subconsciously) affected by what he saw around him, rather than directly and consciously.

I'm a little uneasy, too, about the first set of parentheses:

> Traditional approaches fail to consider the influence of society and politics upon the imagination (that is, the unconscious 'place' Keats inhabited during his composition)

This seems to suggest that Keats's poetic imagination *was* 'unconscious' after all, thus reinforcing the traditional view of Keats as a transcendent, ethereal genius, the conduit of the muses who

wrote great poetry without really knowing how, his pen a hollow bone for inspiration. We could improve the sentence, stylistically as well as in terms of intellectual clarity, by replacing the parenthetical material with:

> (the apparently autonomous space of inspiration Keats inhabited during composition)

I would also be tempted to tinker with the last sentence:

> However, as I have demonstrated in my essay, the respective opposing stances adopted by these critiques can be resolved into a view of Keats that both recognizes the influence of specific, historical conditions on his compositional process and, at the same time, acknowledges the role of the transcendent and transcending poetic imagination.

To be honest, it's a bit cumbersome. A more wieldy version would be:

> However, as I have demonstrated in my essay, these opposing critiques can be resolved into a view of Keats that both recognizes the influence of history on his writing and, at the same time, acknowledges the role of the transcendent poetic imagination.

Under the microscope

How does Katy successfully summarize her argument in such clear and concise terms? Let's look at the passage again, this time from a technical perspective. Here's the revised second sentence:

> (2) Traditional approaches fail to consider the influence of society and politics on the imagination (the apparently autonomous space of inspiration Keats inhabited during composition), while materialist criticism does not take into account the possibility that at times Keats may only have been obliquely affected, if at all, by what he saw around him.

If we boiled it down to its rhetorical components, we'd end up with:

> Traditional approaches fail to do A, while materialist approaches fail to do B.

Reduced even further:

> X fails to do A, while Y fails to do B.

This is an example of what we might call a ‘seesaw’ sentence, where ‘while’ acts as the pivot. As soon as we reach ‘while’, we know the second half of the sentence must contain a point of contrast. Logically, it *concatenate*s; that is, individual elements follow on from each other in a way that conforms to our expectations. Strong concatenation helps readers retain the sense of a lengthy passage. We’ll take one more look at Katy’s revised final sentence:

> However, as I have demonstrated in my essay, these opposing critiques can be resolved into a view of Keats that both recognizes the influence of history on his writing and, at the same time, acknowledges the role of the transcendent poetic imagination.

This can be represented as:

> X can be resolved into a view that both recognizes A and, at the same time, registers B.

The moment we read:

> … that both recognizes A

we are waiting for something along the lines of:

> … and does B.

There’s is a reassuring sense of inevitability about this essay’s sentence structure. You can be sure that Katy’s essay was not dashed off on the bus up to campus, and handed in on the way to the student bar. No, she read over her work carefully, having sensibly left time for the proof-reading stage; she made changes, tried different things out, weighed phrases and structures, and only then handed it in. And *then* went to the bar.

Common pitfalls

Let's consider another 'summary' conclusion, this time not quite so accomplished, from a student called Mike. The question he chose to answer was:

> 'For all the over-sized projections of masculinity masquerading in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the novel's male protagonists are virtual case-studies in neurosis, uncertainty, and angst.' Discuss.

Here's his final paragraph:

> *Frankenstein* shows many uncertainties in the identities of the male characters as to their positions in an uncertain and changing world, where the relationship between Man and God was, through science, being constantly questioned. Through modern readings of the text the characters of Victor Frankenstein and his creation have merged and blurred as if their characters have in fact become one. The novel can therefore be said to contain its neurosis, hysteria, uncertainty, and angst in its examination of humanity, creation, and nature. Placing these uncertainties into the context of contemporary society.

To be frank, Mike, it's a bit of a mess. Whereas Katy's sentences concatenate, these don't – even though they're much shorter. We'll have to work hard to improve things.

Although one could be forgiven for not realizing it, there are two main points being made in this paragraph: (1) rapid changes in society, especially in the area of science, aroused anxieties in early nineteenth-century society; (2) Mary Shelley explores these anxieties, particularly as they affect the male characters in her novel. In order to make these points audible, we need to reduce the background noise. Let's take the first sentence:

> (1) *Frankenstein* shows many uncertainties in the identities of the male characters as to their positions in an uncertain and changing world, where the relationship between Man and God was, through science, being constantly questioned.

The Force definitely wasn't with Mike when he wrote this. Felicitous it is not. To start with, the underlined bits are clumsy

and repetitious. Secondly, is 'shows' at the beginning of the sentence the right word? 'Explores' or 'considers' would be better. And can we really say the novel shows uncertainties *in* the identities of the male characters? Surely the novel's male characters experience uncertainties *about* identity, which is slightly different. Finally, inexperienced writers often resort to the colloquial phrase 'as to', used in the sense of 'concerning' or 'regarding', but it seldom works satisfactorily. It is usually better to write 'concerning' or 'regarding'.

Sentence (1) needs to be rearranged along these lines:

> Mary Shelley's novel considers the problem of male identity in a changing world, where rapid advances in science meant that even the relationship between Man and God was being questioned.

It's already a lot better. Moving on to the second sentence – Mike's done well to remember that 'Frankenstein' is often incorrectly assumed to be the name of the 8-foot-tall 'monster', rather than the scientist who created him:

> (2) Through modern readings of the text the characters of Victor Frankenstein and his creation have merged and become blurred as if their characters have in fact become one.

But this comment is in the wrong place, since it has no logical connection with either sentence (1) or (3). Having read the whole essay, I can also tell you (as I told Mike) that the comment is also out of place because it introduces a new point (the 'merging' of characters). More on this later. To make matters worse, poor expression has rendered the interpolated material spectacularly inaccurate. Confusion over the creature's and creator's name has not occurred 'through modern readings of the text'. Quite the opposite – confusion has arisen through people *not* reading the text. No one who has read Mary Shelley's novel would confuse Victor Frankenstein with the 'monster' (these days we prefer to say 'creature'). Mike knows this, of course, but hasn't found a way to say it unambiguously.

To cap it all, the sentence is repetitive:

> … the characters of Victor Frankenstein and his creation have merged and blurred as if their characters have in fact become one.

If two things have merged and blurred, we don't need to add that they have become one. Doh!

Let's jettison the second sentence altogether and proceed to the third:

> (3) The novel can therefore be said to contain its neurosis, uncertainty, and angst in its examination of humanity, creation, and nature.

It's the same story, I'm afraid: sloppy expression – and we're not at home to Mr Sloppy, agreed? Can we really say the novel *contains* 'neurosis, uncertainty, and angst'? Isn't it rather the case that the novel *explores* its *characters'* neuroses? Again, there is a subtle but significant difference between what Mike means and what he has actually written. The sentence should be amended to:

> The novel therefore explores neurosis, uncertainty, and angst in its examination of humanity, creation, and nature.

Mike's saved his best (that is, worst) moment till last:

> (4) Placing these uncertainties into the context of contemporary society.

He's only gorn n' ended on an incomplete sentence! What an ignominious exit. The verb needs immediate surgery if this passage is going to make sense to anyone other than Mike:

> Mary Shelley places all these uncertainties within the context of contemporary nineteenth-century society.

Let's reassemble the conclusion, bearing in mind all we've discussed so far:

> Mary Shelley's novel considers the problem of male identity in a changing world, where rapid advances in science meant that even the relationship between Man and God was being questioned. The novel therefore explores neurosis, uncertainty, and angst in its examination of humanity, creation, and nature. Mary Shelley places all these uncertainties within the context of contemporary nineteenth-century society.

It's still not great – and, as one often finds, the word 'therefore' is a giveaway that the argument doesn't, in fact, flow in a particularly logical or thereforey manner. But at least we've done what we can with the material at hand, and it's grammatical now. In terms of argument, though, this conclusion couldn't punch its way out of a wet paper bag, in a tropical storm, as I'll explain.

Internal coherency again

Even in the improved version of the final paragraph, the first two sentences do not stand in particularly meaningful relationship to each other – despite the slightly desperate, and thoroughly bogus, 'therefore', which wouldn't fool any tutor worth his or her salt.

Let me elucidate. The first sentence proposes that *Frankenstein* considers how males relate to 'an uncertain and changing world', where science is questioning 'the relationship between Man and God'. The second shifts focus to suggest the novel 'therefore' explores 'neuroses, hysteria, uncertainty, and angst' through examining 'humanity, creation, and nature'. There's no logical progression here that I can discern. We haven't arrived at the second sentence because of some point that has been clinched in the first. What's *actually* happening is that both sentences tell us something slightly different about the novel.

Although Mike's final paragraph is, on first glance at least, a 'summary' conclusion, it doesn't really summarize an argumentative process. Mike was probably a little unsure himself about what his essay had demonstrated, and it shows in his conclusion. Consequently, the reader is left in some doubt with regard to Mike's final position. Which brings me on to my next theme …

Making your point clear

Your tutor must feel satisfied that something has been established in your essay. You might, say, have evaluated tropes of 'lastness' in Author X's novels, or analysed Artist Y's anti-Napoleonic propaganda in the 1800s. Whatever it is (and it's a good idea to try to put your 'macro'-argument in a few words like I've just done), you need to spell 'it' out for your reader. Louise, who tackled the same question as Mike, achieves this level of clarity more effectively:

> In this assignment, I have argued that despite appearing to privilege the male voice, *Frankenstein* actually works to undermine oppressive masculine ideologies that seek to define and silence the novel's female characters.

Clear, purposeful sentences such as the above can make the difference between a low and high 2.1 grade.

I don't wish to seem crotchety about Mike's essay, and certainly not contemptuous. To adapt Kurt Vonnegut's wonderful observation about literary critics who review novels, plays and poems too harshly: a marker who expresses 'rage and loathing' for a student essay is 'like a person who has put on full armor and attacked a hot fudge sundae or a banana split'. That said, the majority of Mike's mistakes arose because he hadn't read over his essay to make sure his words said exactly what he intended them to mean. He presumed I'd do the slog of working it out. Believe me, if you submit your assignment without casting a cold eye over it first, in the hope your tutor will recognize the genius beneath the muddle, you're in for a rude awakening.

Answering the question

Another deficiency in Mike's conclusion lies in its failure to connect with the terms of the question, which you'll remember asked us to consider the proposition that even the most apparently confident male characters in *Frankenstein* are neurotic and angst-ridden:

> 'For all the over-sized projections of masculinity masquerading in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the novel's male protagonists are virtual case-studies in neurosis, uncertainty, and angst.' Discuss.

Although Mike mentions key words such as 'neurosis' and 'uncertainty', his conclusion does not really address the critical scope of the question. Don't forget, he's been asked to think about over-sized projections of masculinity, so his conclusion should at least make passing reference to something that could cover for an over-sized projection of masculinity on a dark night. I'm not suggesting he repeat the question verbatim in the final paragraph.

There are few worse ways to end an essay than: 'and that is why I agree male characters in *Frankenstein* are "virtual case-studies in neurosis, uncertainty, and angst"'. Nevertheless, you must at least pay lip-service to the question.

I've tried to do exactly that in the following passage, which concludes an essay on 'Mary Shelley, Science, and Gender Politics':

> Against a backdrop of feminist polemic, Mary Shelley associates scientific advance with stereotypical masculinity, as embodied by the ambitious Victor Frankenstein and his gigantic creature. Conversely, the victims of science are all 'homely' women such as Elizabeth and Justine, or effeminate males like Clerval and the 'girlish' William. Each of these characters is dispatched by the creature, who is the very emblem of scientific advance. Yet in spite of this schematic treatment, we should ask ourselves how successful Mary Shelley actually is in conflating social critique and feminist discourse. As I've contended in this essay, patriarchy's representatives, Victor, Walton, and the creature, exhibit clear symptoms of angst and neurosis, and hardly present role models of normative early nineteenth-century masculinity. Ultimately, Shelley's novel reveals that, far from being masters of their own destiny, even the ostensible protagonists of change are subject to the wider doubts and uncertainties of the age. In a sense, Mary Shelley's 'working theory' of masculine identity is refuted by her male characters themselves. Perhaps the message we should derive from *Frankenstein* is that the experience of living in an era of technological advance cuts across – still cuts across – gender boundaries, and can prove equally unsettling for men and women.

The paragraph would certainly benefit from some more tinkering, but on the whole I'm reasonably happy with it. It summarizes my larger argument, and restates the best points fairly lucidly. The reader gets my argument in 'headlines' – namely, that Shelley (1) genders society as 'feminine' and scientific advance as 'masculine'; (2) that her novel shows how the pursuit of science is personally destructive as well as socially disconsolidating; (3) that such schematic gender politics tends to simplify the lived experience of social upheaval in the Romantic period.

Stylistically, the passage earns its keep. I quite like the phrase 'against a backdrop of feminist polemic' (although I toyed with an alternative, 'from a palpably feminist perspective'). The paragraph is also tightly argued and it's internally coherent, as we can see by breaking it down into its components:

1 Mary Shelley presents scientific study, and the ambition driving it, as 'masculine',
→ 2 whereas the *victims* of science are all 'feminine'.
→ 3 Is Shelley successful in imposing a feminist narrative onto a social critique?
→ 4 Possibly not – Shelley's schematic (science = masculine/predatory/bad, society = feminine/vulnerable/good) breaks down as the ostensibly super-'masculine' Victor and his creature turn out to be insecure, lonely, and afraid.
→ 5 The novel thus offers a different message to that which Shelley intends: namely, that scientific advance is equally unsettling for men and women.

If we reversed the order of any of these points, the paragraph would no longer make sense – the sure sign of a close argument.

Adding new material to the conclusion

Earlier, I complained that Mike had interpolated hitherto unseen material in his conclusion. The decision to include new points in a 'summary' conclusion depends to some extent on *what* it is you wish to add, and *how* you intend to add it. Avoid anything that opens up or requires further discussion. For instance, if I added the following sentence to my own *Frankenstein* conclusion, I'd be doing myself a grave disservice:

> Mary Shelley's husband Percy revised the text of *Frankenstein* substantially, and is responsible for much of the novel's elaborate Latinate rhetoric. In one sense, Percy Shelley is himself an outsized masculine presence in Mary's novel.

Hmm, interesting point. But no matter how intrinsically engaging, it has no place in my conclusion because it's too close to the principle subject of my essay for comfort. If Percy played a

role in editing Mary's novel, that fact could have considerable bearing on my larger argument, and so should have been considered as a discrete point elsewhere. A more 'neutral' piece of new information with only a tangential relationship to my main themes, though, could be an effective way of drawing things to a close:

> The modern world continues to struggle with its own version of technological revolution, and is regularly forced to reassess hitherto stable values. Mary Shelley's novel of science and attendant responsibility has lost none of its relevance since first publication in 1818.

'DISCURSIVE' CONCLUSIONS

The discursive conclusion offers scope for flair and inventiveness. This time, there's no need to worry inordinately about providing a final overview, or assiduously mapping a retrospective route through your arguments. Continue developing your ideas until you drop!

Striking a tone

I'm going to look at a highly energetic discursive conclusion from an English student called Stuart. His essay explores the cultural impact of postmodernism (don't worry about the technical terms; I'm more interested in how his conclusion is organized). I've included the last three paragraphs this time, which is where the final section of Stuart's essay begins:

> And what of the future? Since this essay has so far been broad and sweeping, it seems only fitting to sweep broadly across the future and try to foresee the fate of writing.
>
> The digital revolution has made information more accessible than ever before. There's no longer any pressing need for reference material to be physically stored in libraries. Today's students are as likely to download their set texts onto a tablet as to purchase a physical copy. Perhaps one day 'writers' will be renamed 'typers', and literature will be 'born digital', composed and published solely in computer-readable format.

> This brave new world will be distressing for some. But in my view, it is the responsibility of the artist to turn his or her back on our cosy orthodoxies and assumptions, and to create afresh.

Look at Stuart go! It's all enthusiasm, verve, and brio. I love the conversational tone his passage strikes, and I really admire how he communicates so directly with the reader. The paragraph isn't only easy to read, but *fun* as well. In contradistinction to the 'summary' conclusion, there's no attempt here to pull all the essay's points together. Apart from the reference to creating afresh, which pops up at various points in Stuart's discussion, the argument about artistic responsibility and writing practices of the future is run here for the first time.

Let's not order the ticker-tape parade just yet though. In fact, there were a couple of awkward moments, which I've silently tidied up. The first sentence in the third paragraph, as things originally stood, was convoluted and poorly expressed:

> This brave new world will be distressing for some, but it serves to amplify the illustration of the breaks that occur at the end of one form of art, and at the start of the next.

Que? I also took out of the third paragraph the following space oddity:

> I am used to my books, and relaxed into the present way that life operates.

'To relax into something' … The usage is rather uncolloquial. Stuart's prose itself was perhaps too relaxed at this point! But these are minor gripes, and once those awkward moments were edited out, the shorter, snappier final paragraph is impressive.

The flourish

The 'flourish' is an optional element in a conclusion, a final bold statement to let your reader know the essay has ended, and ended in style. Think of it as a flamboyant bow. Or, to switch metaphors, if this writing element were a sword hilt, it would have curving quillons, an ornamental knuckle-bow, and *pas-d'âne*

surmounted by shells. Effective in both summary and discursive conclusions, the flourish lends itself particularly well to the latter mode. Stuart's essay affords a good example:

> … it is the responsibility of the artist to turn his or her back on our cosy orthodoxies and assumptions, and to create afresh.

Ah! A stylish end to a thoughtful and thought-provoking conclusion, which despite the odd uneven patch, any tutor would enjoy reading.

Note:

1 Decide whether a **discursive** or **summary** conclusion suits your essay best.
2 Ensure your conclusion is **internally coherent**.
3 Check it makes **sufficient connection** with the terms and scope of the question.
4 Make sure you establish, and are seen to establish, a **clear set of points** or **positions**.

Chapter 5

Grammar and punctuation

Chapter 5

No matter how impressive your ideas are, or how beautiful your essay looks when it arrives in the print tray, or uploads to your university's electronic submission system of choice, bad grammar and poor spelling will instantly prejudice your tutor against you – and with good reason. The days of splurging your ideas out onto the page and letting the reader work out what you mean, are over. If all that mattered was the quality of your ideas, assessment could be done with you in the pub over a beer. But in addition to having good ideas, you also need to demonstrate that you're able to communicate them precisely and efficiently (one of the so-called 'transferable' or 'employability' skills you will take with you when you leave university or college).

In 1818, the political radical and social reformer William Cobbett wrote a *Grammar of the English Language* with the aim of teaching an indifferently educated, down-trodden and exploited working class how to express themselves effectively. Bad grammar, as Cobbett realized, introduces

ambiguity into a discussion. At best, this detracts from the force of an argument; at worst, it makes words appear to be saying something quite other than you intend. If you're not careful, a sentence can slip its leash and run rings around your efforts to impose meaning on it.

In this chapter, I focus on how to express yourself accurately and grammatically. I'll be considering some typical student errors, such as misuse of '*'s*', wrongly placed commas, commonly misspelled words, overuse of the passive, confusion over 'who' and 'whom', 'that' and 'which', and poor hyphenation.

It's illogical, Jim!

It simply is not sufficient to tell yourself 'this reads a bit oddly, but my tutor will know what I mean'. Make sure your sentences *say exactly what you mean*, and *mean exactly what you say*. By applying this rule, you'll identify, and be able to clear up, many instances of clumsy grammar. For a case in point, take a look at the following rather peculiar sentence:

> Of course, attitudes towards colonialism in the seventeenth century were much different from that of a twentieth-century reader.

Let's not worry for the moment about the unsupported generalizations concerning attitudes towards colonialism. Sticking with grammar, ask yourself why is this sentence so odd? Well, to start with, the plural noun 'attitudes' in the first half of the sentence needs to be balanced by the plural determiner 'those' in the second – and not by the singular 'that':

> Of course, attitudes towards colonialism in the seventeenth century were much different from <u>those</u> of a twentieth-century reader.

This makes a *little* more sense now. The next problem is that the two halves of the sentence don't fit together very convincingly. We've got Clarkson and the BBC, where we want Bert and Ernie. Either we match A–A:

A		A
attitudes *towards colonialism in the seventeenth century*	with	attitudes *towards colonialism in the twentieth century*

or B–B:

B		B
attitudes *of seventeenth-century readers*	with	attitudes of *twentieth-century readers*

As things stand, we have a mixture of A–B, which is, not to beat around the bush, wrong. I'd be inclined to run with the first option:

> Of course, attitudes towards colonialism in the seventeenth century were much different from those in the twentieth century.

It's definitely an improvement, but the sentence is still slightly ambiguous. Are we talking about seventeenth-century colonialism, or seventeenth-century *attitudes* towards colonialism? On reflection, I think we're better off completely reformulating the sentence:

> Of course, seventeenth-century attitudes towards colonialism were very different from those in the twentieth century.

Now *that's* more like it. There was never anything wrong with the ideas in this sentence, particularly, just with the way they were communicated. You might say that grammar got in the way! Nevertheless, by working through alternatives – as you should always be prepared to do – we arrived at an elegant solution. Don't be satisfied with a sentence that seems even slightly strange. If it sounds funny or odd, then re-jig it.

Here's another grammatical oddity. Can you spot what's wrong?

> According to Harrison and Wood they suggest there were two responses to XYZ.

Yup, we have a double subject – 'Harrison and Wood' and 'they'. What's more, 'they suggest' is a virtual repetition of 'according to Harrison and Wood'. The sentence should either read:

> According to Harrison and Wood, there were two responses to XYZ.

or:

> Harrison and Wood suggest there were two responses to XYZ.

Crazy commas

Other obstacles to writing clear, logical, and grammatical prose are presented by poor or sloppy punctuation, in particular wrongly used commas:

> The most unlikely thing about this management approach is its humanity, its compassion is remarkable.

I quite like the sentiments of this statement, but grammatically it's deeply suspect. The comma trips the reader up because it doesn't fulfil its proper role: namely, separating items in a list or providing a mental breathing space. Instead it has been used incorrectly in place of a coordinating conjunction (a joining word like 'and', 'or', 'but') or semicolon. The technical term for running two independent clauses together is *parataxis*, also known as comma splicing or run-on commas. One solution is to use a semicolon, dash or colon:

> The most unlikely thing about this management approach is its humanity; its compassion is remarkable.

Another way around the problem would be to split the sentence into two parts:

> The most unlikely thing about this management approach is its humanity. Its compassion is remarkable.

Problems have arisen simply due to sloppy grammar. Although we use parataxis all the time in conversation (e.g. 'I liked the film, the music, too', where the first comma acts as a sort of mental dash), in written English it's tantamount to erecting a flag proclaiming the duchy of bonkerdom. Study the next sentence:

> This may be another aspect of the tragedy of the play, Lear is not allowed to redeem himself fully.

Trickier to resolve. If we were to supply a conjunction like 'and', 'but', or 'because', we would alter the meaning of the sentence in a way I don't think the student intends. In this case, we would be better off avoiding parataxis by reorganizing the sentence:

> Another aspect of tragedy in the play is that Lear is not allowed to redeem himself fully.

Let's consider a final example of how to negotiate paratactic problems:

> Rodin and Balzac were similarly tenacious in character, both worked on projects that occupied them throughout their careers.

There are a few ways of getting around this ungainly construction. We can make two halves out of it, replacing the comma with a semicolon or a full stop; we can change the comma into a dash; or we can alter 'worked' to 'working', which is the option I would plump for:

> Rodin and Balzac were similarly tenacious in character, both working on projects that occupied them throughout their careers.

Hanging participles

'Hanging participles' (sometimes called 'dangling' participles) does not refer to a sick hobby, but a common grammatical error:

> Having read *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen presents Elinor and Marianne Dashwood as two extremes ...

The *participle clause* in this sentence is:

Having read

and the *participle* itself:

-ing

In the example above, we're not sure whether the participle clause relates to the reader of *Sense and Sensibility*, or to Jane Austen herself. Grammatically, the student appears to be claiming that Jane Austen has read her own novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, then presented the Dashwood sisters as two extremes. Obviously, what's meant is that the student, having read the novel, has concluded that Austen presents the Dashwoods as extremes. But the fact we all know what's *meant* won't cut any ice with your professor. If you can't express yourself clearly and unambiguously, how can you expect to get good marks?

Beware the passive

ACTIVE: the dog bit the man
PASSIVE: the man was bitten (by the dog)

In passive constructions, we don't need to stipulate who is doing the action of the verb (in this case the 'biting'). Consequently, when we want a statement to appear impersonal and authoritative, we often use a form of the passive. For instance:

The sample has been exhaustively tested.

One to be taken twice a day.

The government is not to be trusted to keep its election promises.

So far, so passive. But when writing essays, beware of couching everything in this form. Especially beloved of UG students are constructions such as: 'it will be shown that ...', or 'it has been suggested that ...' Such formulations tend to give an essay a rather clinical, detached air, and can very quickly alienate the reader. Be more direct. Shoot from the hip:

> This essay shows that …
>
> My discussion demonstrates that …

An otherwise very good student wrote the following:

> This comparison *has been made* in order to allow Heathcliff's association with canine imagery *to be brought* into focus.

The revision below is much shorter, more forceful, and no less authoritative:

> I have made this comparison to draw Heathcliff's association with canine imagery into focus.

Or, if you don't feel comfortable using 'I':

> This comparison draws Heathcliff's association with canine imagery into focus.

In addition to changing passive constructions into active ones, you'll see that I've also jettisoned the equally robotic 'in order to'. We are left with a sentence that's finely balanced and really quite elegant. You might, if you're feeling extra-confident and on top of your texts, cultivate a different kind of authority. How about:

> I make this comparison to draw Heathcliff's association with canine imagery into focus.

It has a certain panache or swagger, and exudes confidence. The stark 'I make' is bold, and very 'present' – and not just in terms of tense. You certainly wouldn't want to go overboard with this kind of tactic, but used sparingly it can be very effective.

Apostrophes (*'s*)

This first thing to note is:

> it's = it is, as in 'it's a nice day'
> its = possessive, as in 'to take Wordsworth's poem on its own terms' (NO apostrophe)

In academic essays, avoid using contractions like 'it's' – even when you *do* mean 'it is' or 'it has'. Write the words out in full (I know I haven't in this book, but that's different – I'm trying to appear affable and approachable). Other regular offenders in this respect are 'isn't', 'can't', and 'doesn't'. Shun them like you would a surveillance officer.

Here are some more potential '*s* pitfalls – all the following are correct:

John Keats's poem is beautiful.

Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* were first published in 1798. (Both authors need '*s*)

Jane Moore's introduction is exemplary.

The two poets' republicanism is explicit in their joint preface.

Writing Essays is the people's choice.

This book is yours. (NO '*s*)

Note:

1. For plural nouns that *don't* end in *s* (like 'men', 'children', and 'sheep'), we add 's to indicate possession: *'the men's boat', 'the children's coats', 'the sheep's wool'*.
2. If a plural noun already ends in *s* (like 'boys', 'friends', or 'poets'), and we want to indicate possession, an apostrophe is required but no extra *s*: *'the boys' toys', 'the friends' houses', 'the poets' preface'*.
3. However, with *names* ending in *s*, add *'s*: *'John Keats's poetry'*.

Hyphens

She is twenty-three years old

A twenty-three-year-old man

In the twentieth century

A twentieth-century reader

But don't hyphenate adverbs ending in *-ly*:

the steadily rising tide

the wrongly accused man

the recently appointed professor

Similarly:

a mid-twentieth-century text/in the mid-twentieth century

But:

an early twentieth-century text/in the early twentieth century

Who and whom

Be honest – how many of you know when to use 'who' and when to use 'whom'? You shouldn't worry if you don't have a clue, since hardly any native speaker of English does. Nevertheless, the rules are quite simple. If we are referring to people rather than things, we use 'who' for *subject* relative pronouns and 'whom' for *object* relative pronouns. Calm down, I'll explain these terms. But before I do, let me remind you what subjects and objects are, and how to recognize them.

The 'subject' is the name given to the person or thing doing the action of the verb in a sentence. The 'object', on the other hand, receives the action of the verb. Study this example:

```
 S     V       O
John caught the ball.
```

'John' is the subject because he is the one doing the action of the verb (the catching). The 'ball' is the object, because it is receiving the action of the verb (by being caught).

Get the idea? I'll move on to subject and object *relative pronouns*:

```
               O        S V
That is the man whom I saw yesterday.
                └───┘
```

The relative pronoun (italicized) refers to 'man'. 'Man' is the object of the sentence, so we need to use 'whom'.

S V O
That is the man *who* sells tickets.

This time 'man' is like the subject, so we need to use 'who'.

For a quick method of determining whether a relative pronoun is linked to the object or subject of the sentence, ask yourself if the sentence would still make sense without the pronoun? If it would, then you are dealing with an object pronoun. If not, you are looking at a subject pronoun. Consider the first example again – as you'll see, 'whom' is optional, and therefore it must be an object pronoun. By contrast, 'who' in the second example is necessary for the sentence to remain comprehensible, which means it must be a subject.

How does all this translate into a more academic context?

O S
Leigh Hunt is a figure in British Romanticism *whom* we often

V
underestimate.

The relative pronoun relates to the object (Leigh Hunt), and could be left out if we chose. If we decide to keep it, however, we need to make sure we write 'whom' not 'who'.

By contrast, here's an example of the relative pronoun as subject. This time it can't be omitted:

William Cobbett was a man *who* worked hard to make himself a thorn in the establishment's side.

That and which

The next thing to agree on is when to use 'that' and when to use 'which'. You'd be surprised how many experienced writers simply swap to 'which' when they feel they've used 'that' too often, or else use 'which' for plurals and 'that' for singulars.

Again, the rules are quite straightforward. Although 'that' and 'which' are interchangeable in spoken English, in written English we can use 'that' to introduce *defining relative clauses*, and 'which' for *non-defining relative clauses*. I'll explain these terms for you now.

Defining relative clauses

These tell us exactly *which* person or thing is meant:

> The fish (*that*) I want is red.

Which fish? The one that I want ('ooh, ooh, ooh!'). For a slightly more academic example:

> The most accomplished early poem (*that*) Keats wrote is 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer', composed in October 1816.

You can see that 'that' is like an object pronoun, and can be left out if you wish. Be careful, though. Some tutors have a vehement aversion to students omitting relative pronouns. If your professor doesn't have a social media account, he or she probably regards omitted relative pronouns as evidence of general cultural slide. If you suspect your prof is 'old-school', it would be as well to include *all* relative pronouns, irrespective of whether they're subject or object, defining or non-defining.

Non-defining relative clauses

These give extra information about the person or thing described. They are preceded by a comma, or enclosed in commas if followed by another clause, as is the case in the next example:

> The new fish, *which* likes to swim near the surface, cost a ridiculous amount of money.

and:

> These three poems, *which* Keats wrote in the spring of 1819, represent an astounding achievement.

Whose

I'll conclude this section by clarifying the use of 'whose'. A few examples should suffice:

> This trend is exemplified in the paintings of Mitchell Wainright, *whose* style after 1987 becomes more urgent and unsettling.
>
> John Clare, *whose* poems we have been discussing, spent much of his adult life in a mental asylum.
>
> Charles Lamb, *whose* sister Mary killed their mother in a bout of mental instability, was one of Britain's great essayists.

Whatever happens, don't do what an otherwise very good student did and ruin an excellent sentence by misspelling 'whose' as 'who's' (= who is):

> The heroine, *who's* character becomes increasingly dynamic in the novel, labours under a series of class stereotypes.

I have only one word to say here, and it is 'Argghhh!'

Antecedent nouns

Antecedent nouns are words to which pronouns like 'he', 'she', and 'it', and determiners like 'that' and 'which', refer back. For instance:

> In *Jane Eyre*, the eponymous heroine is caught in a sadistic circle of punishment and desire, and ends the novel as she began, subject to Rochester's moods and whims.

Here 'she' refers back to the antecedent noun 'heroine'. If there is too great a distance or too much going on grammatically between the pronoun and its antecedent – particularly when other nouns are involved – sentences quickly become confusing and may even spiral out of control:

> In response, Herring composed a story about a little boy and a pony who wore a red ribbon, which was very well loved. He won an award for it in 1923.

Help! Which antecedent noun is connected to the relative pronoun 'who' – 'pony' or 'boy'? Who on earth is wearing the red ribbon? Is it the 'story', 'pony', or 'ribbon' that was well loved? And as for who won the award, and for what …! This sentence is a complete mess because it's difficult to tell which antecedent noun belongs to which relative pronoun.

Chaos can also arise through mismatched antecedent nouns:

> The role of French sculpture was to arouse patriotism and celebrate <u>its</u> great historical figures.

Was it the role of French sculpture to celebrate great figures of French sculpture, great figures of patriotism, or great figures in French history? I ask, because things are extremely ambiguous as they stand. The ambiguity arises since 'its' needs an antecedent noun, and reaches back to 'French *sculpture*'. Yet I am sure that the student who wrote this sentence is not suggesting that the role of French sculpture was to celebrate great figures in the history of French sculpture! Rather, it is *France's* history that is meant. Clearly 'its' and 'French sculpture' are mismatched, and one of them, like Oscar Wilde and his curtains, or wallpaper, will have to go:

> The role of French sculpture was to arouse patriotism and celebrate France's great historical figures.

Oui! Bon! You see, grammar is actually very easy. All you need to do is read through your work and apply the test of logic. Think of it in much the same way as a computer program debugger approaches code – run a parsing test: if the debugger gets through all the lines of code without running up against a logical error, and stopping, the code is said to be well formed. You want to produce well-formed sentences and paragraphs. Here's an example of a long, grammatically complex, but perfectly formed prose passage from my historical crime fiction novel, *The Cunning House* (Sandstone, 2015):

> Lifting his eyes skywards, he allowed himself to imagine for a moment the slug's flight onwards, beyond the constraints of the footman's skull, its acute plane over the dovecots, the inevitable parabola, pictured the projectile coming to rest,

> chinking curiously, next to a flowerpot, where the contrast between its brutal grey and the plant's living colour briefly detained any servant whose eyes happened to be drawn in that direction by a strange insect, busy at the sticky parts.
>
> A lot easier if that were true. (p. 4)

Apart from the final short sentence, included for dramatic effect, the rest is one sentence. See? Easy.

Last thoughts on pronouns

When I was writing this book, a passage in Chapter 4 caused me quite a few problems:

> Although Mike's final paragraph is, on first glance at least, a 'summary' conclusion, it doesn't really summarize any argumentative processes. Mike was probably a little unsure himself about what his essay had demonstrated, and it shows in his conclusion.

As I had used the student's name frequently in surrounding paragraphs, I thought I ought to try to replace the underlined 'Mike' with 'he'. This produced the following:

> Although Mike's final paragraph is, on first glance at least, a 'summary' conclusion, it doesn't really summarize any argumentative processes. He was probably a little uncertain himself about what his essay had demonstrated, and it shows in his conclusion.

Something was still wrong. To be able to link 'he' to the concept of Mike, the reader first needs to see the name 'Mike'. However, what we actually get is 'Mike's final paragraph' (where the antecedent noun is 'paragraph', not 'Mike'). Linguistically speaking, there was enough of the student in question in the noun phrase to dupe me into thinking I could deploy 'he'. But there's a whole universe of difference between 'Mike' and 'Mike's final paragraph' (ask Mike). For this reason the passage read oddly – like the example about French sculpture we just looked at. In the end I had to accept that it was better to repeat the student's name than allow a grammatical beast to slouch into my book.

Sometimes you have to compromise between stylistic elegance and grammatical propriety (although, generally speaking, elegant prose will also be grammatical prose).

I could see, but now I'm blind!

One of the first things that happens to many students when they enter an exam is that their grammatical faculties promptly jump ship. Take a look at the following passage from an English paper:

> Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the 1960's and like *Jane Eyre* is partly autobiographical and has many references to Rhys's upbringing. Born in the West Indies but moved to England when 16 years old, Rhys encountered *Jane Eyre* and developed a particular curiosity to the character of Bertha Mason. Rhys was interested in her as she too came from the West Indies and considered the treatment of Bertha as unfair and looked upon the character sympathetically.

There is actually a fairly good piece of writing in here trying to get out; the whole thing just needs tidying up grammatically and stylistically:

> Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the 1960s. Like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Rhys's novel is partly autobiographical and contains many references to the author's own childhood. Born in the West Indies, Rhys moved to England at the age of sixteen where she first encountered *Jane Eyre*. She developed a particular interest in the figure of Bertha Mason, who in Brontë's novel arrives, like Rhys, in England from the West Indies. This shared perspective allows Rhys to look sympathetically upon the character.

OK, it's still a little higgledy-piggledy, and the relation between inert information and conceptualized, evaluative writing is out of balance … but it's a hundred times better than it was. We've rectified decidedly odd expressions like 'Born in the West Indies but moved to England when 16 years old' and 'she developed a particular curiosity to Bertha Mason'. We've also split the long and confusing last sentence into two more easily digestible chunks. Finally, we've picked up irritating little blunders like the

superfluous apostrophe in the phrase 'in the 1960s'. Your professors won't be as impatient about grammatical infelicities and typos in exam essays as they are when they assess coursework, but it's still worth thinking about such things when you sit down in the examination hall.

Commonly misspelled and confused words

In the age of the spel-cheker, pore speling is practtically unforgiveable. Yet the same old words still slip through the net. Here are a few that continue to cause difficulties:

analyse	principal/principle
cannot	accept/except
concede	elusive/illusive
misspell	there/their
perceive	ambiguous/ambivalent
perhaps	whether/weather
proceed	Jacobin (radical association, founded during the French Revolution, which, led by Robespierre, instituted the Reign of Terror)/Jacobite (adherent of James II after his overthrow in 1668)
surprise	
interpret	
affect/effect	

Note:

1. **Read over** your work – best of all out loud – making sure it's grammatically coherent.
2. **Watch out** for silly 's mistakes and wrong spelling.
3. Never assume your tutor will know, or have the patience to work out, what you mean. It's your job to **make yourself clearly understood.**
4. Make sure you **say what you mean** at all times.
5. Apply the **logic** test – make sure your sentences are 'well formed'.

Chapter 6

Improving your style

Chapter 6

Some students assume that so long as all the points they want to make are in their essay somewhere, no one will care about *how* they have been made. Let me stop you there. Your tutors have to negotiate large batches of essays at a time; if your assignment looks like it's going to be a drab, monotonic exemplar, your marker's interest may quickly evaporate. A few minutes spent thinking about style can make all the difference. After all, your task in a piece of written work is not merely to cobble together an argument, but to gain your reader's attention and *hold* it. You're being judged on your *suasory* skills – that is, on your ability to persuade. An engaging style can be of great service in this respect.

If we're going to improve the way we write, we need to relearn to feel 'the fine spell of words' (Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion*). I say 'relearn', because in our childhood we experienced words as virtually physical, tangible things – can you remember actually *being* there in the stories you read as a child? Sadly we lose this ability as we grow older, through inhibition, stress, or apathy;

we forget that we were – and are – capable of giving and receiving 'melodious utterance', to borrow from Keats once more. This chapter will help you to rediscover the power of words and enrich your style. Literally in other words, we're going to be looking at some style power-ups.

Functional stylistics: more on signposting

Signposts, you'll remember, are those little words and phrases that help readers navigate their way through an argument. Under the following sub-headings, I've listed signposts frequently found in modern criticism, indicating where they can be most advantageously deployed in your essays:

Signposts for use in introductions

In this essay, I wish to examine/consider (e.g. Shakespeare's use of sub-plot, etc.)

In this essay, I address/suggest that/offer a reading of …

In this essay, I give particular attention to/open an aperture into …

This essay seeks to disclose …

This essay will trace the development of …

My discussion details …

My thesis proposes that …

In what follows, I will …

To introduce new points and ideas

The following section investigates/examines/explores/considers …

My purpose here is to draw into sharp focus …

Critic X suggests/asserts/proposes/insists/contends/argues that …

A feminist approach to Eliot's poems provides a rich lens through which to …

Continuing/developing points already made

Moreover, …

What is more, I propose …

Further to this theme, …

I wish to elaborate this theme by asking …

To return to the issue of …

To illustrate, I wish to draw into focus XYZ …

Like Critic X, I am interested in how … , but I also want to suggest …

To introduce an opposite idea

This proposition could be considered from a slightly different perspective …

I began this reading by noting that … However, to offer a further modulation …

And yet, contrary to Critic X's assertion …

To this point I have considered … I now want to determine the extent to which …

To offer a re-inflection of Critic Y's analysis …

By contrast, …

Conversely, …

Countervailing against this reading, the following analysis …

For use in conclusions

To conclude, I want to …

To move towards a conclusion, we might consider …

Singly, these instances of X do not prove a great deal. Taken together, however, …

The foregoing evidence I have presented leaves little doubt that …

My discussion has shown that …

The real lesson to be learned from a study of X, is the extent to which …

Finally, …

I wish to end by looking at …

In summary, …

You'll see that I've included 'I' or 'my' in several phrases, and you're perhaps worried because at school you were told never to do this. Employed judiciously, however, I/my can be very effective. They allow you to 'step out' of the essay to speak more directly to the reader, injecting a human dimension to the discussion (remember what we said in Chapter 5 about the passive voice and the perils of clinical, robotic detachment). They show your prof you're confident enough to use your own voice. And by using the first person pronoun you are owning your argument. You're saying 'I thunk these thoughts'. Not all disciplines smile on the use of 'I', but students of English literature can rest assured that using the first person is absolutely fine. While you certainly don't want to introduce every point with 'I' – instead of sounding suave and knowledgeable, you could come across as 'half-baked' – you might consider using the first person in your introduction, at key junctures in your argument (where you want to strike off in a new direction, say), and in your conclusion. For an extremely effective use of I/my, where exactly the right balance is struck, look back to Jane Moore's introduction at the beginning of Chapter 1.

Developing a voice: 'melodious utterance'

While we're on the subject of useful phrases, we might pause to think about how we can make our points sound more authoritative and eloquent. For instance, instead of writing (rather obliquely), as one of my students did:

Brontë shows Heathcliff as a powerful force of nature

why not say:

Brontë *presents* Heathcliff as a powerful force of nature

Or even better:

> Brontë *projects* Heathcliff as a powerful force of nature

Similarly, in place of the somewhat unimaginative:

> Edmund pretends to be a loyal son to his father, Gloucester

how about trying:

> Edmund *masquerades* as a loyal son to his father, Gloucester

Or even (and this is advanced stuff):

> Edmund *masquerades loyalty* to his father, Gloucester

Rather than saying:

> Wollstonecraft uses lots of feminine pronouns when she describes the landscape of Sweden

why not venture:

> Wollstonecraft genders the Swedish landscape as feminine

or refer to Wollstonecraft's

> gendering of the Swedish landscape

You'll notice that as the sentences get better they also tend to get shorter. Economical prose tends to have a more direct impact on the reader, and can be more effective than long, rambling sentences. So where you might once have written:

> The knight-at-arms does not seem to have much control over his environment in Keats's poem 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' …

you could say:

> The knight-at-arms' agency in the poem is limited.

Note:

Agency – the extent to which a character has influence over what happens in his or her narrative. For instance, when Susan Wolfson discusses Keats's life, she talks about a world 'in which his agency is slight at best' ('Keats Enters History', in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 19).

The judicious use of an idiom or two can also liven up your prose dramatically. For example:

> *Local signs* that the president's administration was in difficulty were evident in …
>
> Bismarck's policy at this juncture *casts in bold relief* the differences between Prussia's attitude towards the northern and southern German states.
>
> Wolsey had his *finger on the pulse of the times*.

That last example is edging towards cliché, though, which is always a potential pitfall when deploying colloquial phrases in academic prose. The point is, don't just think about what you're saying in your essays, but also about how you wish to come across to your reader. It can make all the difference – think of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Imagine the reaction of the blood-sick soldiers at Agincourt, if, instead of his rousing 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more' address, Shakespeare's Henry had said, 'Look, I know lots of you have been slaughtered, but I'd like to ask you to fight on for a bit, if that's alright'.

Variety is the spice of life

Since we're concentrating on style, let me draw your attention to the concept of 'elegant variation'. Essentially, it just means finding different ways to say the same thing to prevent your reader falling asleep at the wheel. Imagine you're shrugging up an essay on Disraeli's government; you'll probably have occasion to use the phrase 'Disraeli's government' several times. But if you refer repeatedly to 'Disraeli's government', 'Disraeli's government' could very quickly become a topic of some not inconsiderable

tedium. Your reader's imagination will be yelling 'Shield Wall!' faster than Ragnor Lothbrok at the gates of Paris. Try a few alternative phrases for signalling this particular 'prime minister's regime'. Why not intersperse 'Disraeli's leadership' with his 'period in office', or even his 'years of rule'. If you were feeling especially lyrical, you could venture something along the lines of:

> While his hand was at the rudder, Britain's influence (waxed/waned/stayed the same).

It's the same scenario with regard to characters in books. Let's imagine you are descanting on the representation of women in John Keats's poem, *The Eve of St Agnes*, a dark-cornered gothic romance involving two characters, Madeline and Porphyro. Rather than endlessly repeating Madeline's name, mix in some allusions to 'the poem's heroine' or the 'female protagonist'. If these phrases seem a little prosaic, you could always use Keats's own elliptical reference to Madeline as 'St Agnes's charmèd maid' (line 193).

This principle of avoiding repetition applies at every juncture of the essay. For instance, if on re-reading your work you discover that you are using the word 'quotation' too much, in phrases like:

> This quotation from critic X suggests that …
>
> Critic X quotes critic Y to underscore her point that …

swap it for a word with a similar meaning (i.e. a synonym), such as 'citation':

> This citation from critic X suggests that …
>
> Critic X cites critic Y to underscore her point that …

Or even:

> In the words of critic Z, …

Be careful not to go overboard, though. It isn't worth ending up with awkward and cumbersome circumlocutions, simply to avoid using the same term twice. That is to say, if you've just mentioned Keats's knight-at-arms, don't feel you have to search

for an expression like ‘the armoured lover’, ‘the visored loiterer’ or the ‘feverish sojourner’ to be able to refer to him again. Use your discretion. Remember, the last drop makes the cup run over! The most important thing is to start thinking about style, and consider your reader. Make your essay a pleasure to read – throw in a few surprises and some well-finished phrases. It *will* be appreciated.

Once you begin thinking of alternative ways to say things, it soon becomes second nature. The following lists only took me ten minutes or so to compile:

- *Points* can be underlined, underscored, highlighted, drawn attention to, drawn into focus, or pulled into bold relief.
- *Arguments/debates/discussions* can be detailed (i.e. outlined), assessed, considered, confirmed, examined, scrutinized, proposed, ventilated, ventriloquized, evaluated, marshalled (i.e. organized in a particular way), rehearsed (i.e. summarized/outlined), or identified and calibrated.
- *Critics* can be quoted, cited, reiterated, alluded to, refuted, deferred to, demurred from, negotiated, or manoeuvred around.
- *You* have ideas, notions, concepts, conceptions, or suggestions.
- *Positions* can be confirmed, defended, modified, strengthened, refined, or relinquished.
- Equally, two or more *points* and *positions* can be compared, contrasted, juxtaposed, or brought into apposition. They may also throw mutual light on each other, or be mutually illuminating.

STOP PRESS: three words that have become quite popular in recent criticism are ‘contestation’, ‘discourse’, and ‘rhetoric’. They are generally used in the following senses:

1 ‘Contestation’, for disagreements or arguments:

   The early nineteenth century was a period of intense ideological contestation between agents of entrenched state conservatism and increasingly vocal reformers.

2 ‘Discourse’, for ideas, political positions, dialogues:

   In Cobbett’s *Grammar of the English Language* (1818), particularly his vehement rejection of rules based on Latin and Greek paradigms, we discern a radical discourse of theorized opposition to wider conservative politics.

Leigh Hunt's attacks on the Prince Regent, and on the government of the day – particularly during the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1817 – contribute to an especially fraught period of cultural and political discourse.

3 'Rhetoric', for a mode of address, or manner of speaking:

The rhetoric of ingrained literary conservatism is apparent throughout Lockhart's reviews of Hunt and Keats in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.

Edmund's soliloquies in *King Lear* are text-book examples of the self-justifying rhetoric of insubordination.

England's coffee houses and public houses were awash with revolutionary rhetoric in the 'Days of May'.

You might also wish to 'excavate' an argument or debate from a period of history, instead of merely uncovering it/bringing it to light; assess the extent to which Leigh Hunt's politics were 'mapped' onto Keats's early poetry, instead of simply showing how Hunt's politics are visible in Keats's poetry; demonstrate how Austen's comic style 'modulates' rather than ranges from warm humour to dry satire; illustrate how X is 'contingent on', instead of merely dependent on, Y; or 'locate' a text/show how it is 'embedded' at the 'intersection' of contemporary nineteenth-century debates, rather than just placing a book in its historical context.

Get the idea?

Phrases to avoid

In the last section of this chapter, I want to alert you to some phrases that should be used sparingly, or avoided altogether. We could kick off with the following:

It can be seen that …

I think that …

In my opinion …

In order to do X, we first must …

It has been argued that … (unless you say *by whom*)

Ditto: Critics have argued that … *and* It is recognized that …

For most undergraduates, these constructions represent familiar and 'safe' ways of introducing points, or moving on to new ones. However, they are very unimaginative, not to mention extremely vague. *Which* critic argues? *Who* does the recognizing? If you knew, you would have said so (and your tutor will immediately realize it, since by no means all university lecturers are stupid). If you want to invoke critical consensus or authority, there is simply no substitute for going to the library/using your browser of choice (preferably open source and encrypted), and reading around a subject. Then, having done the legwork, *show* that you've researched your topic: cite works of criticism, quote a pithy phrase or sentence. Which do you think is more effective?

> It has been argued that Mary Wollstonecraft links the aesthetic subject to her environment.

or:

> As Elizabeth Bohls has recently argued, Mary Wollstonecraft gives the aesthetic subject a 'corporeal connection' to her environment (p. 160).

Unless you've learned nothing so far, I'm going to assume you picked the latter. Incidentally, Bohls's discussion of Wollstonecraft is fascinating, and can be found in *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

'In my opinion' is another formula you should treat with extreme caution. If you happen to be the historian Lawrence Stone or the literary critic Jerome McGann, then writing 'in my opinion' before making a point might load what you have to say with the accretions of a massy erudition developed over many thousands of research hours. But coming from an undergraduate who has devoted perhaps a whole week (or, equally likely, a whole afternoon, between episodes of Game of Thrones) to a particular topic, it just doesn't have quite the same ring. At best, it comes across as naïve; at worst, it smacks of arrogance. For sure, this might be wholly unintentional; nevertheless, it can prejudice a reader against you. Besides, markers take for granted that what you've written is your opinion.

On the subject of striking unfortunate tones, I often see work in which students have written something along the lines of:

> In this essay, I have decided to examine the treatment of punishment and upbringing in *Jane Eyre*.

'Decided'? Wta*! There's absolutely no need to share your thought processes prior to the essay. Equally, there's no need to tell your reader that you started making notes in a blue pen, then changed to a purple one with sparkly silver bits in it.

Think about how you want to come across. Aim for confident, but not arrogant; colloquial, but not chatty; energetic, but not frenetic. Also, be aware that it's easy to pitch your critical register too high. Don't parade your ideas in contorted syntax and jargon in the mistaken belief it will lend your essay weight and intellectual rigour, like this rather pretentious, but no doubt well-meaning, fellow did:

> After much consideration, I have chosen to examine Gerard Manley Hopkins's late sonnets with a view to expediting a hermeneutics that might account for the poet's internalization of a pleonastical mode of dialogical negotiation between himself and his creator.

Um. Jargon-ridden, torturous, ostentatious, and loud without substance, darling, as Craig might say. Do not emulate. All this passage really says is that Hopkins uses a lot of words. If your argument is shallow, overly showy words are not your friends. In fact, they will only exacerbate the situation. By the same token, if your argument is impressive, incomprehensible terminology will detract from its impact. You lose both ways. Aim for a more direct and communicative style.

Here are some more phrases you should think very carefully about before committing to paper:

> Thus
>
> Therefore
>
> Clearly
>
> Patently

Obviously

Thence

Whence

However

Indeed

Some of these are not bad *per se*, but are terribly overused. The worst offenders are 'thus', 'therefore', 'however', and 'indeed', and I'm as guilty as anybody in this respect. Indeed, it's easy to see why they are so popular since they provide a kind of argumentative shorthand. The problem is that we can be duped into thinking we've clinched a point merely because we've written 'thus' or 'clearly'. Use words of this ilk sparingly.

'On the one hand ... On the other' is also a formula you ought to be wary of employing, because it can produce a stilted effect. It's usually better to use just the second half of the phrase, as this student did:

> Tennyson's later poetry is often interpreted as a retreat into conservatism and nationalism. We might think of such poems as the politically leaden 'Charge of the Light Brigade' and the morally and rhythmically stiff Arthuriana. On the other hand, the publication in 1850 of *In Memoriam*, a poem elegizing the poet's love for his dead friend Arthur Hallam, bears witness to the fact that the older Tennyson had lost none of his early readiness to experiment linguistically – or his capacity to unsettle.

A quick final word of advice. The soundest way of expanding your critical vocabulary and developing a feel for which phrases work best where, is to engage robustly with external criticism. Keep a file open for helpful phrases and critical terminology. My lists of good and bad phrases will set you off on the right track, but if you're serious about fulfilling your true potential as an essay writer (and since you've dropped the moolah for this book, I'm assuming you are), you'll need to fish out your library card. In my day, you could still find medieval illuminated manuscripts on the open shelves; now libraries are all vending machines and

laptops. Even so, the library – physical or virtual – is a dynamic place where ideas live. Get acquainted, start reading.

Note:

1 Think about **how** you say things as much as **what** you say.
2 **Avoid** repetition.
3 Help your reader follow you by **signposting** your argument.
4 **Avoid** tired, overused phrases and critical clichés.
5 **Read criticism** to develop your critical vocabulary.

Chapter 7

Quotations, footnotes and bibliographies

Chapter 7

I am not exaggerating when I say that at least 110% per cent of students are spectacularly useless at organizing quotations, footnotes, and bibliographies. Yet, paradoxically, it's an area where anyone can shine. In this chapter, I show you how to develop an impressive-looking referencing system that will cover all your undergraduate needs.

Before I start, let me tell you there are three magic words as far as references and bibliographical details are concerned, and each of them is 'consistency'. If you keep strictly to one system for the duration of your essay, you'll be fine. So, if you start off using the abbreviation 'p.' for 'page', don't suddenly switch to 'pg.' halfway through. If you refer to a quote on p. 45 of a particular book at the beginning of your essay, then subsequent references should not be to p.45, P. 45, or even (ye gods!) P45.

Why is it so important to get your bibliographical details right? It boils down to ambiguity, or rather, *avoiding* ambiguity, because the whole

point of giving clear, accurate references is to enable your readers to follow up for themselves any interesting books and articles mentioned in your discussion. If you give the wrong date of publication, omit the author's name, or misspell a title, then it might be impossible for your readers to find the source they want. Imagine depriving someone of the joys of Edith Bunchdrop's *Collected Letters of Arthur Hogsbury, 1901–1922*, 27 vols (Charleston-upon-Piddle: Lampden Press, 1923). How would you live with yourself? Yeah, that's right.

QUOTATIONS

Let's raise the curtains on quotations. I've divided this topic into 'long' and 'short', 'prose' and 'poetry', since slightly different conventions pertain in each case.

Short prose quotations

Any quotation between a word and a sentence in length should be incorporated within the main body of your essay. The following examples illustrate this:

(a) As Damian Walford Davies explains in his review of Dannie Abse's recent anthology, 'Anglo-Welsh' and 'Welsh Writing in English' are both terms used, if not always unproblematically, to describe 'a body of work written in English by poets who stand in some meaningful relation to Wales, its landscape, people and culture' (p. 64).

(b) It seems that fashion designers in the 1990s took Oscar Wilde's quip that 'being natural is simply a pose' as literally as they did cynically.[1] They were richly rewarded as customers fell over each other to buy the latest incarnation of the 'natural look'.

> **Note:** Please don't underline, embolden, or italicize quotations. Just don't.

Page numbers and footnote markers in short prose quotations

Unless you are quoting a source for the first time, in which case all bibliographical information belongs in a footnote, page numbers are placed in brackets at the end of a sentence *before* the full stop:

> … to Wales, its landscape, people and culture' (p. 64).

Or, if followed by a quotation from a different page in the same book, before a comma, as in the following example:

> (c) Walford Davies draws attention to the anthology's awareness of 'issues of identity and distinctiveness' (p. 64), and its celebration of 'living presences and […] ghosts, shades invoked' (p. 66).

You'll notice that I have abbreviated 'page' to 'p.' in the above examples, followed by a space and the relevant page number. If the quotation runs over the page in the text you are quoting from, use 'pp.' (short for 'pages'), followed by a space and the inclusive page numbers separated by a hyphen, like so:

> (d) As Thomas Woodman notes, 'such poets also have the problem of distinguishing themselves from mere "prince-pleasers"' (pp. 46–7).

See this chapter's 'Bibliographies' section for a full reference to Woodman's article.

Observe that I've written pp. 46–7. Be as economical as you can with bibliographical details, but make sure you give enough information to avoid ambiguity. With the teens the teen digit is repeated – i.e. 113–14 rather than 113–4 – because the numbers represent single words – thirteen, fourteen, etc. Here are some more examples:

> p. 1, pp. 1–2, pp. 9–10, pp. 15–16, pp. 23–4, pp. 54–63,
> pp. 103–7, pp. 112–13, pp. 187–8, pp. 1101–2, pp. 1453–4

Footnote markers are placed at the end of a sentence *after* the full stop. Footnote markers are placed at the end of a sentence *after* the full stop. Yes, I said that twice. You're welcome. See:

> … that 'being natural is simply a pose'.[1]

Long prose quotations

These are separated from the main body of the text. There are two ways of making them stand out: either keep the long quotation in 12-point, but indent it from the left margin, thus:

(e) While he was at Paris, Franz Liszt came under the influence of perhaps one of the most captivating figures in nineteenth-century music, the Italian violinist Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840). The result was immediate, as Donald J. Grout explains:

> Stimulated by Paganini's fabulous technical virtuosity, Liszt determined to accomplish similar miracles with the piano, and pushed the technique of the instrument to its furthest limits both in his own playing and in his compositions. (p. 581)

Or use smaller 10-point type, in which case you no longer need to indent the text. For instance:

(f) While he was at Paris, Franz Liszt came under the influence of perhaps one of the most captivating figures in nineteenth-century music, the Italian violinist Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840). The result was immediate, as Donald J. Grout explains:

Stimulated by Paganini's fabulous technical virtuosity, Liszt determined to accomplish similar miracles with the piano, and pushed the technique of the instrument to its furthest limits both in his own playing and in his compositions. (p. 581)

For a full reference to Grout's compendious book (my trusty A-level companion), see the section on 'Bibliographies' later in this chapter.

> **Note:** Always leave one line space before and after long quotations.

Page numbers and footnote markers in long prose quotations

Footnote markers are placed *after* the full stop in both long and short quotations:

> … in his own playing and in his compositions.[1]

Page numbers are slightly different, however. Compare examples (a) and (f): with short prose quotations incorporated in the main body of the text, page numbers are given in parentheses *before* the full stop:

> *From (a)*: '… its landscape, people and culture' (p. 64).

With long prose citations (where a line space is left before and after), page numbers are placed in brackets *after* the full stop, like footnote markers:

> *From (f)*: … and pushed the technique of the instrument to its furthest limits both in his own playing and in his compositions. (p. 581)

Placing the parenthetical page numbers after the full stop clarifies that the page reference is not part of the text being quoted. (The problem doesn't arise with short citations, where the beginning and end of the quoted material are clearly marked by inverted commas.)

Don't interrupt sentences with indented quotations

Never break a sentence in half with a long quotation. That is, never, *ever* do this:

(g) The environment has long been a global issue, as David H. Close explains,

> Environmental problems have […] confronted governments with new responsibilities, and provoked conflicts either between governments and citizens, or between different branches of the political system. They have also stimulated new forms both of protest and of remedial action.[1]

and the situation looks set to become increasingly tense.

If you want to incorporate Close into your argument, you should do it like this:

(h) The environment has long been a global issue and the situation looks set to become increasingly tense, as David H. Close explains:

> Environmental problems have […] confronted governments with new responsibilities, and provoked conflicts either between governments and citizens, or between different branches of the political system. They have also stimulated new forms both of protest and of remedial action.[1]

For a full reference to Close's article, see 'Bibliographies'.

Omissions

You can omit unimportant words, or even whole sentences, from any passage you wish to quote from, but make sure you notify your reader of the omission by replacing the superfluous text with three dots in square brackets […]:

> Dickens populates his ill-lit, claustrophobic London backstreets with a cast of minutely observed caricatures […], testament to their creator's understanding of the darker tones of human psychology.

In this case I left out ', particularly in *Oliver Twist* and *Edwin Drood*'. The technical term for three dots is an ellipsis.

Quoting poetry

If the quotation is a line or less in length, treat it like a short prose quotation:

(i) We could say that in this aspect of mass surveillance policy, the prime minister arrived, metaphorically speaking, at the 'two roads' diverging in the 'yellow wood' described in Robert Frost's famous poem 'The Road Not Taken' (l. 7).

If the quotation runs over two lines, indicate the break with a vertical slash | or forward slash / if you prefer. For example: 'But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted | Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!' (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', ll. 12–13).

If the quotation is longer than two lines, the verse should be set out as it appears in the original source. Leave a line space before and after:

(j) In stanza one of John Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', a chilling scene of physical and psychological desolation is painted in a few deft strokes:

> O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
> Alone and palely loitering?
> The sedge has withered from the lake,
> And no birds sing.
> (ll. 1–4)

Note: All long verse quotations are indented from the left margin.

Giving line numbers in poetry quotations

For one line of poetry or less:

… in his famous poem 'The Road Not Taken' (l. 7).

For longer quotations:

> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.
> (ll. 35–7)

Incidentally, these lines are from Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' (1851), and well worth a butcher's.

FOOTNOTES

Footnotes go at the bottom of the page. Here are some to accompany the publications mentioned in this chapter. I've organized

them under headings to draw your attention to the slightly different ways in which books, essays in books and articles are listed, but there's no need to use these headings in your essays.

Books

[1] Donald J. Grout, *A History of Western Music*, 3rd edn (London: Dent, 1981), p. 581.

[2] *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 334.

Essays in books

[3] Thomas Woodman, '"Wanting Nothing but the Laurel": Pope and the Idea of the Laureate Poet', in *Pope: New Contexts*, ed. David Fairer (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 46–7.

Articles

[4] David H. Close, 'Environmental Movements and the Emergence of Civil Society in Greece', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45/1 (1999), 52–64, at 52.

Reviews

[5] Damian Walford Davies, review of Dannie Abse, *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (1997), in *Interchange* 1 (1998), 64–70, at 64.

Online resources

[6] Theresa M. Kelley and Jill H. Casid, 'Introduction: Visuality's Romantic Genealogies', *Romantic Circles* (December 2014) <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/visualities/praxis.visualities.2014.intro.html> [date of access: 8.4.15] (para. 1 of 20)

I don't want to worry you unduly, but all the commas and full stops belong where and *only* where I have put them. It takes a little time to check that everything has been positioned correctly,

but it's worth the effort because nothing impresses like order in footnotes. Your essay may contain a thought experiment that takes us beyond the standard model in physics, but I'm willing to bet that achievement won't impress your marker any more than a set of neat footnotes and a nicely ordered bibliography. If you're the sort of person who likes the front of their shoes to be in line when you put them away, or can't walk past a picture without making sure it's hanging properly, then you'll have no problems with footnotes. If, on the other hand, straight things annoy you, there are difficult times ahead.

Let's look at these headings more closely.

Books

Details for books are given in the following order:

name of author, forename first, surname last, followed by a comma
title of book, italicized, followed by a comma
name of editor (if any)
edition (if any: i.e. 3rd edn)
number of volumes (if more than one)
place of publication, preceded by an opening bracket, followed by a colon
name of publisher, followed by a comma
date of publication, followed by a closing bracket, followed by a comma
page number(s) of quotation, preceded by p. (or pp.), followed by a full stop

For instance:

[1] Donald J. Grout, *A History of Western Music*, 3rd edn (London: Dent, 1981), p. 581.

If the identity of the author is clear from the title of the book, you do not need to repeat it in the footnote:

[2] *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 334.

If there is more than one volume, specify how many:

[1] *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), II, p. 186.

Note:

1 '**Vols**' ('volumes'), like '**eds**' ('editors'), or **'edn'** (edition), does not need a full stop, since 's' or 'n' is the last letter of the full word. We only use full stops in abbreviations – that is, with words that do not end with their final letter, such as **ed.** ('editor' or 'edited by'), **vol.** ('volume'), or **trans**. ('translated by').
2 Never put a comma before brackets: i.e. never do this:

vols, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Essays in books

The correct order of information is as follows:

name of author, surname last, followed by a comma
title of essay, in inverted commas, followed by a comma
title of book, italicized, preceded by 'in'
name of editor(s), preceded by ed. (eds)
place of publication, preceded by an opening bracket, followed by a colon
name of publisher, followed by a comma
date of publication, followed by a closing bracket, followed by a comma
page number(s) of quotation, preceded by p. (or pp.), followed by a full stop

So, for example:

[3] Thomas Woodman, '"Wanting Nothing but the Laurel": Pope and the Idea of the Laureate Poet', in *Pope: New Contexts*, ed. David Fairer (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 46–7.

Articles

The correct order of information is:

name of author, surname last, followed by a comma
title of article, in inverted commas, followed by a comma
title of journal, italicized
volume number
date of publication, enclosed in brackets, followed by a comma
inclusive page numbers of article, followed by a comma, followed by 'at'
page number(s) of quotation, followed by a full stop

The next footnote belongs to example (h). As I mentioned the author David H. Close's name in the example, there is no need to repeat it in the footnote. Also note that we do not need to put 'p.' or 'pp.' before page numbers:

> [1] 'Environmental Movements and the Emergence of Civil Society in Greece', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45 (1999), 52–64, at 52.

Reviews

The order for details is:

name of reviewer, surname last, followed by a comma, followed by 'review of'
name of author of book under review, followed by a comma
title of book under review, italicized
date of publication of book, in brackets, followed by a comma, followed by 'in'
title of journal/newspaper in which review appears, italicized
volume number (if applicable)
date of publication, enclosed in brackets – OR, if a newspaper, date of publication, including day, month and year, with no brackets – followed by comma
page number(s) of quotation, followed by a full stop

For example:

> [1] Barry Forshaw, review of Richard Marggraf Turley, *The Cunning House* (2015), in *Financial Times*, 25 March 2015, p. 24.

In case you're wondering, it was a rave review.

Referencing material found on the Internet

You might not know what URLs stand for (Uniform Resource Locators, as it happens), but you won't get far nowadays at school, college or university without making use of them. When I wrote the first edition of this book, the World Wide Web – or 'da interwebz', as it's commonly known – was only six or seven years old. While there were already some amazingly rich digital resources, trying to enjoy them on a dial-up modem was hard work. These days, not only is broadband internet an astonishingly rich and versatile source for leading-edge information, but most students were 'born digital', and grew up using it. However, while surfing the cyber-breakers might be second nature to them, that doesn't mean they know how to reference web sources. Far from it. Who's the n00b now?

Don't worry, though. Citations of web resources are constructed on the same principles as references to any other form of publication:

Online article/database:

The order for details is:

name of author, surname last, followed by a comma
title of article (if applicable), in inverted commas, followed by a comma
title of journal or book, italicized
volume number (if applicable)
date of publication, enclosed in brackets
Internet address, enclosed in < >
date when you visited this site ('date of access:')
location of quotation, if applicable, enclosed in brackets (give page numbers only when these are fixed and stable; otherwise, indicate location using chapters, sections and paragraphs, or percentage)

So:
online article:

> Theresa M. Kelley and Jill H. Casid, ‘Introduction: Visuality’s Romantic Genealogies’, *Romantic Circles* (December 2014) <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/visualities/praxis.visualities.2014.intro.html> [date of access: 8.4.15] (para. 1 of 20)

online database:

> Page image, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913* <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/images.jsp?doc=181012050003> [date of access: 8.4.15]

The above reference is to a page facsimile of an Old Bailey court transcript relating to the trial of Thomas White and John Hepburn in 1810, so I’ve indicated that fact with ‘Page image’. As you can see, there’s some flexibility in the referencing system, and if you can economically add a detail that will help your reader, that’s fine.

We can also use our basic template for blogs and posts:

blog/post:

> Matthew Sangster, ‘The Vere Street Coterie’, *Romantic London* (26 March 2015) <http://www.romanticlondon.org/the-vere-street-coterie/> [date of access: 7.4.15]

I’ve included ‘*Romantic London*’, because ‘The Vere Street Coterie’ is an individual post within a larger online map resource/research project entitled *Romantic London*.

ebook:
The template is slightly different for ebooks:

name of author, surname last, followed by a comma
title of journal or book, italicized
date of publication, enclosed in brackets, followed by a comma (include publisher’s details, if applicable)
location of quotation, enclosed in brackets (give page numbers only when these are fixed and stable; otherwise,

indicate location using chapters, sections and paragraphs, or percentage)
digital edition (for example, Kindle edition, Nook edition, EPUB and PDF files)

For instance:

Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice* (London: Orbit, 2013), p. 107. Kindle edition.

If there were no fixed page numbers, I would have indicated the location of the quotation with '1764 of 5598', or '32%'.

Social media:
There's still some fluidity in terms of conventions for referencing social media. The following format, though, covers most eventualities, and shouldn't queer your pitch with any reasonable marker:

name of author, surname last
handle, enclosed in brackets, followed by a comma
content of message/tweet in its entirety, in inverted commas
date, enclosed in brackets, followed by a full stop
format, followed by a full stop

Here's one of my social media gems, fitted to the above template:

Richard Marggraf Turley (@RMarggrafTurley), '@dafprys Such promises!' (30 March 2015). Tweet.

OTHER THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT FOOTNOTES

Details of publication

The title of a book and the name of its author(s) rarely present a problem, but what about publisher's details? What – and more to the point, where – is the pertinent information? On the second or third page of all books (counting from the very beginning), you'll find a list of names, addresses, and dates in tiny print. Let us take a book by Anthony Stevens and John Price, and scrutinize the problem more closely:

First published 1996
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

OK – to work! Place of publication? London. If you're reading *Evolutionary Psychiatry* in the UK, you don't need to worry about Routledge's New York address. Publisher? Routledge. Date of publication? 1996. The complete reference should look something like this:

> [1] Anthony Stevens and John Price, *Evolutionary Psychiatry: A New Beginning* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 10.

Economy in footnotes

Footnotes are there to record what sources you used and cited during your discussion. They give readers the chance to follow up any interesting-looking articles, books and web resources for themselves (or to check that you aren't guilty of plagiarism). Footnotes do *not* exist to host secondary or tertiary discussions, no matter how tempting this may seem. They are also not there to act as a dumping ground for anything not quite good enough to make it into your main text. Learn to let go! Be ruthless in limiting footnote space to details about books and articles.

Furthermore, wherever possible, try to pare down the information you do include. For instance, if you've just mentioned an author's name in your discussion, and it's clear that you are quoting from their work again, there is no need to repeat the name in the footnote. Only repeat it if not doing so would give rise to ambiguity. How does that work in practice? A footnote for the next example would not include the author's name in the footnote:

> In Grant Hoffmeyer's words, public interest in archaeology received a 'monumental boost' after the discovery of the Sutton Hoo burial site.[1]

A footnote to the following passage *would*, however:

> The problem of disentangling literary influence is complicated by the fact that 'all authors write with posterity in mind' and very often disguise their tracks.[1] Indeed, as Elizabeth Hopkins goes on to say …

> **Note:** Even though the quotations in the above examples occur in the middle of a sentence, footnote markers are placed after the next available full stop.

After the first footnote (more on economy)

The first time you refer to a book, provide full bibliographical details in a footnote (author's name, title of book, place of publication, name of publisher, date of publication, and so on). For all *subsequent* references, you only need to give the book's short title. For instance, assume we have just quoted a passage from Parmy Olson's *We Are Anonymous: Inside the Hacker World of LulzSec, Anonymous, and the Global Cyber Insurgency* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2012), and a couple of pages further on we want to make another reference. Our second footnote would simply contain the short title of the book accompanied by a page number, like so:

> [1] *We Are Anonymous*, p. 89.

It could be, however, that a second footnote is not necessary at all. If we have a number of short quotations from this book within the space of a paragraph or two, and no intervening references to any other publications, we can simply insert the relevant page numbers parenthetically in the text:

> … as Parmy Olson argues in her recent book, *We Are Anonymous*.[1] The term 'hacker' was a 'famously imprecise' word (p. 6).

What we must avoid at all cost are footnotes resembling this ungainly example:

> [8] Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth and Coleridge, p. 104.
> [9] Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth and Coleridge, p. 103.

[10] Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth and Coleridge, p. 104.
[11] Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth and Coleridge, p. 66.

The fact that the title of the book comes before the authors, and has not been underlined, is bad enough; but even worse, behold – needless repetition! After the first short reference, the appropriate page numbers should simply have been included parenthetically in the main body of the text.

BIBLIOGRAPHIES

The bibliography lives at the end of your essay and tells your reader what books you have used while preparing your essay. In general, anything you have read, or even sniffed at, belongs in the bibliography; otherwise you lay yourself open to the charge of plagiarism. Some institutions will require you to distinguish between 'primary' and 'secondary' texts (i.e. literature and criticism), but whether you use sections or not, the principle for listing books is the same. Again, 'consistency' is our watchword.

A bibliography compiled out of books, reviews, and articles mentioned in this chapter would look like this:

Close, David H., 'Environmental Movements and the Emergence of Civil Society in Greece', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45/1 (1999), 52–64.

Grout, Donald J., *A History of Western Music*, 3rd edn (London: Dent, 1981)

John Keats: The Complete Poems, ed. John Barnard, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977)

Kelley, Theresa M. and Jill H. Casid, 'Introduction: Visuality's Romantic Genealogies', *Romantic Circles* (December 2014) <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/visualities/praxis.visualities.2014.intro.html> [date of access: 8.4.15]

Leckie, Ann, *Ancillary Justice* (London: Orbit, 2013)

Olson, Parmy, *We Are Anonymous: Inside the Hacker World of LulzSec, Anonymous, and the Global Cyber Insurgency* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2012)

The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913 <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/images.jsp?doc=181012050003> [date of access: 8.4.15]

Stevens, Anthony and John Price, *Evolutionary Psychiatry: A New Beginning* (London: Routledge, 1996)

Walford Davies, Damian, review of Dannie Abse, *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (1997), in *Interchange* 1 (1998), 64–70.

Woodman, Thomas, '"Wanting Nothing but the Laurel": Pope and the Idea of the Laureate Poet', in *Pope: New Contexts*, ed. David Fairer (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990)

Note:

1 No full stops at the end of bibliography entries (unless after page number runs for articles).
2 The names of any second authors are not reversed (see Stevens and Price).
3 Inclusive page numbers are given for articles, but not for essays in books.
4 In bibliographies (as opposed to footnotes) the surname of the author(s) or editor(s) precedes their forename(s): i.e. Brown, John – not John Brown.
5 Entries are listed alphabetically according to the author's or editor's surname (see '4' above).
6 If there are no authors, you can still preserve the alphabetical system. Look for head words – I've slotted '*The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*' database in under 'P' (not 'T' for 'The'). Also see the entry for John Keats's poems, listed under 'K' for 'Keats' (not 'J' for 'John').
7 In footnotes the *first* line of an entry is indented; with bibliographies the *second* and following lines are indented (it's called 'hanging' indentation in word processors).

If you have two or more entries for the same author, use a 3-em dash rather than repeating his or her name:

Michel Faber, *Under the Skin* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000)
——— *The Book of Strange New Things* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014)

And that's about it. Don't lose your patience – the first few times you try to get quotations, footnotes, and bibliographies right you

will undoubtedly become frustrated. Persevere – it *is* worth it, and you'll be surprised at just how quickly you get the hang of things.

Note:

1. No essay is complete without **full bibliographical references** (i.e. footnotes and a bibliography).
2. **Consistency** is everything.
3. Although at first it's difficult to adhere rigidly to a system, you will **definitely save time** in the long run.
4. Footnotes might be tiresome to do, but they look impressive and **anyone** can get them right.

Chapter 8

Getting the most out of secondary sources

Chapter 8

In the first edition of this book, Chapters 8 and 9 were devoted to the themes of 'using the library's card catalogues' and 'getting the most out of word processors and printers'. As I'm sure you can imagine, large swathes of those chapters are now hilariously out of date. Card catalogues, like elves, have all but passed out of the world, and three-year-olds know how to print. Besides, many institutions have long since transitioned to electronic essay submission, removing the need to print physical copies altogether. Libraries have also changed a great deal, and nowadays are as much 'about' comfy sofas and group study tables as they are books. In fact, modern libraries give old lags like me the 'futsies' (2000AD's Mega-City One slang for 'future shock').

That said, not all of my original advice concerning libraries and preparation for essay submission is defunct. Actually, some of it is more pertinent than ever. This remodelled Chapter 8 collects tips from the original version that remain hot, brings others up to date, and adds a new discussion

around presentation – just as important to an electronically submitted assignment as it was to 'hard copy' back in the day.

In the age before students became 'customers', libraries were all too often uninviting museums staffed by dour custodians of books. When Dante sat down to write his vision of the innermost circles of hell in the *Divine Comedy*, it was probably just after a visit to the library. Today's libraries are much friendlier places; they've become social hubs. They're also digital hubs, kitted out with computers and laptop sockets galore. In fact, so much of today's library experience is orientated around computers, that students often neglect to use the rich physical resources around them. They might choose to work in the library, but many rely on Google Books in preview mode or Amazon 'look inside' for their secondary sources. It's tempting to do so, but not really the best strategy. Not only will you have to make do with the frustratingly truncated sections available for viewing, which encourages a 'bite-sized' approach to criticism, but you'll also miss an opportunity for long, deep engagement with other ideas.

Your first port of call, then, should be your library's physical 'content management system', or bookshelves, to take advantage of the material your lecturers have ordered specifically to accompany, supplement and enhance their courses. And for many essay writers, this is where things fall apart. Because if anything, the modern student's 'analogue' library skills have declined since the first edition of this essay writing guide. So in the following section, I'm going to remind you how to locate a book in physical library space. Once you've been inducted into the mysteries of the library, a whole new world of deep learning will open up to you.

The trick of it is to make the library work for you, not against you – and for that you need a system. Without a system, the whole 'book thing' quickly descends into a nightmare of Red Wedding proportions. You'll fall prey to students who hide the best books on the Weimar Republic upside-down in the biology section until they need them, or find long queues mysteriously forming around the self-service checkout terminals just when you want to leave, or watch in open-mouthed despair as three librarians and the IT helpdesk attendant go off for lunch together, leaving a trainee member of staff to cope at the busiest period of the day. But it need not be so. Waaawk this way!

Introductory courses

Most universities and higher education institutions offer their new undergraduates introductory courses on using the library. Don't be tempted to miss these. You'll be initiated into the way of the catalogue, shown how to borrow books and how to use Inter-Library Loans (if your library doesn't have the volume you want, it can usually get it for you from another library). Depending on how archival the librarians are feeling, you might also be shown how to operate a range of more advanced (that is, technologically *un*advanced) bibliographical resources, such as microfilm (old or rare books photographed onto tiny rolls of film, and read through a magnifying viewer), and specialist search programs. The sooner you get the hang of the library, the sooner you can stop wasting time queueing up at the helpdesk or bothering stray librarians for help. This is good, because librarians can be unpredictable, and are dangerous when cornered.

The library catalogues (how to find books)

The library catalogue tells you precisely, down to a matter of centimetres, where the book you'd like to consult is shelved. It also tells you how many copies of a particular book the library holds, and how many of them are out on loan.

Using the catalogue

It doesn't matter where you're studying, library catalogues generally work along the same lines. First select the sub-catalogue you wish to search: your library probably organizes its holdings into separate databases for periodicals, journals, books, electronic journals, physical manuscripts, and media such as DVDs (remember them?). You can, of course, 'search all', but that usually produces junk. The more you can refine your initial search, the better things usually turn out.

Let's assume you're looking for a book that's been included on a reading list provided by your tutor. Since you'll already have full bibliographical details, you can do a *name/title* search. Simply enter the title of the book you want, together with the

author's name, and wait for the shelf location to pop up on the screen. It'll look something like this:

PR4433.F7/T

If you don't know what all those strange letters, numbers, dots and dashes mean, finding a physical library book will take on Flappy Bird porportions of pain and frustration. Don't worry, though, because I have a very particular set of skills, acquired over a long career, and today they're at your disposal.

Name/title searches are the quickest and most accurate way of finding out where your book is shelved. If you only have *some* of the book's details, however, you'll need to perform one of the other searches:

1 title, or words from the title
2 author's name
3 subject/keywords

If you have a title, or part of a title, but no author, try the first option, *title, or words from the title*. This lists all books in the library that sound like yours, in the hope that the one you want will be among them. If, on the other hand, you have a name, but can't remember the title of the book, then the second type of search displays all publications in the library listed under your author's name. The third search option, *subject/keywords*, makes an inventory of all the books in the library on similar topics to yours. For instance, entering 'Romanticism' in this type of search would produce a chronicle of books on the subject of Romanticism, although the word itself might not appear in the titles of all, or indeed any, of those publications.

In addition, you can refine searches using 'switches' such as AND, OR, and *. For example, entering

cyborgs AND androids

in a *subject/keyword* search calls up only those items in the database that have been 'tagged' by the library as being about both cyborgs *and* androids. Entering

cyborgs OR androids

summons books on *either* topic. The * switch allows you to search for variants on a word. For instance:

romant*

would list items tagged with *romanticism*, *romantic*, and *romantics*. It would find the following books, for example:

Eve Benedict, *Women and Romantic Culture* (London: Nosuchpress, 2016)

Michael Davies, *The New Romantics: The 80s Pop Revolution* (London: Nosuchpress, 2016)

Edward Jones, *Romanticism and Empire* (London: Nosuchpress, 2016)

Using the card catalogues

Amazingly, some libraries still have card catalogues – usually for esoteric material, or bequeathments (personal collections donated to a larger library), that no one's got around to digitizing yet. Whereas a computerized database consists of ones and zeros stored on a server somewhere, the card catalogue is made up of heavy cabinets containing rows and rows of tiny drawers. On the front of each drawer is an alphabetical range. Find the one that covers your author's surname (for instance, the *Ela–Kia* drawer would hold information about books on or by George Eliot and John Keats, but not Rudyard Kipling). Open the drawer and thumb through the cards inside until you hit the desired author and book. From there on, it's simply a matter of jotting down the shelf reference and trotting off to find the item in question.

OK, I've done all that! Now where's the bl**dy book?

Once you have your shelf location, you are halfway to finding your book. Suppose we'd like to consult *Romantic Paradigms in Trailor Park Boys* by Michael Jacobs, which in Brickshaw University Library (and any other library in the world that uses the same shelving system) is kept at PR4837.E9/J. Let's deal with the reference in stages, starting with the first two letters, **PR**4837.E9/J.

First, we need to establish where books with shelf references beginning 'PR' are kept. Do this by consulting the library's floor plans, which should be displayed prominently next to the doors to each floor. In Brickshaw, all PR books are kept on the second level. So up we go … puff, puff!

We're on level 2 now. I can see countless rows of bookshelves in front of me, all labelled at each end with two or three letters of the alphabet. Make your way over to the ones marked PR and we can begin working on the next part of the reference, PR**4837**.E9/J.

On the spine of every book or journal in the library, you'll find a sticky label with a shelf location printed on it. This ensures that, sooner or later, books end up back where they belong; it also means you don't have to walk around with your head at ninety degrees, reading book titles in the forlorn hope that you'll stumble across the item you want by chance. The books on the PR shelves in Brickshaw are labelled 1–5000. Home in on the 4000s, then slow down because our book can only be metres away. Keep a close eye on the labels as you move along – the 4800s will appear soon. Find the **4837**s and we're almost there. Now we're looking for labels ending with **.E9**. There should only be a few of these, and we want the one with **/J** at the end – the '**J**' is for Michael **J**acobs. And there it is: *Romantic Paradigms in Trailor Park Boys*. Congratulations, you've found your first book. By working through each stage of the reference in turn, we pinpointed the precise location of our book. And that's all there is to it.

If you can't find Jacob's book, but the computers insist it *is* still in the library, somebody might have been reading it *in situ*. It's either lying on a table somewhere, is on one of the librarians' 'pending shelving' trollies, or it's been put back carelessly by the last reader. To cover that last case, check the books on either side of where yours *should* be, according to the catalogue, and you may still be lucky.

All this might sound terribly complicated, but it'll soon become second nature. It is a good idea to do some 'dry runs' well in advance of your first essay deadline, though.

The 'paper chase'

Libraries are woefully underfunded, along with further and higher education in general. (Plenty of money for foreign wars,

financial sector bail-outs and mass surveillance programmes, oddly enough.) As student numbers multiplied through the 1990s to the present day, libraries have struggled to provide enough copies of more popular books to satisfy demand. This creates 'knock-on' problems. How can you show your tutor you have engaged robustly with secondary criticism when there isn't any on the shelves to engage with? When essay deadlines loom, a frustrating paper chase invariably ensues. With just a little forethought, you can make things a lot easier for yourself.

At the beginning of each semester, your tutors distribute course outlines and bibliographies telling you in which week particular books or topics will be studied. You'll also receive a list of essay questions and deadlines. Let's assume that your History seminar on the Weimar Republic is scheduled for the last week of October, and the first essay deadline is set for the end of the second week in November. Go straight to the library and borrow the most recent criticism – even if November seems a long way off. The best books on the Weimar Republic should still be sitting on the shelves, blissfully unaware of what awaits them in the form of coffee rings, defacement, and puddles to be dropped in. You might not have time to read these books properly now, but you can flick through them, and photocopy sections that seem useful. Remember to ask in your department or library about copyright regulations, though, and always fill in a copyright declaration form (your library will provide these) before photocopying. At the time this book went to press, one was allowed to photocopy, for private use, a single copy of an article from a journal and up to 5 per cent of a book (except for this one – buy your own, tightwad). File these photocopies away, and you'll have them when you need them. It might sound obvious, but hardly anyone does it.

The alternative is to run around like a headless chicken the week of your essay deadline, when all the library has to offer on the Weimar Republic are a couple of dusty old books from the 1950s, and an odd-shaped thing without a cover to say what it's called, or who wrote it.

Renewing/recalling books

Make use of the online facility for checking your library account. Without even setting foot in the library you can see which books

you've borrowed, which are due back, and which are already overdue. You can also renew, reserve, and recall books in this way.

While this system is convenient, it's open to abuse. Rather than trudge over to the library to return books they no longer need, some unscrupulous students simply renew them by computer and then use them to prop open a window for a week or two. When an essay is due, they reserve or recall every single book in the catalogue that looks as though it might be relevant, even though there won't possibly be time to read them all. Such antisocial behaviour means that other users don't get access to the best books. The only way to ensure you get a fair crack of the whip would be to resort to similar tactics, and that way *everybody* loses out. So only use the computers to renew books you really do still need, and be selective about those you reserve or recall.

Ordering books

Sometimes, as you're researching your topic, you'll come across tantalizing footnote references to some article or book that sounds crucial for your essay, only to discover your library doesn't hold it. There are two options. Either you put in an Inter-Library Loan request, or you can ask your library to buy the volume in question. Some libraries allow students to order titles directly through their website – look for a heading like 'purchase request'. If not, you can ask your tutor to order it. You'll need the book's author, title, publisher, date of publication, 10- or 13-digit ISBN number (or ISSN number, if it's a journal or periodical), and price.

Keeping tabs on your books

The library fine is a supremely democratic institution. No matter who you are, there's no escaping once its dread talons reach out for you. I remember receiving a letter from my old university library (Leeds Brotherton), literally on the day before my graduation ceremony, informing me that unless I settled an outstanding debt of £1.50 incurred for a late book, no degree would be awarded me. And they meant it.

During your time at university or college you will, or should be, borrowing and returning books on a regular basis. Some will be loaned out for two weeks, others for only three days,

or even twenty-four hours. Believe me, it's easy to lose track of when they're all due back. Since fines mount up quickly, either keep your printed-out borrowing receipts in one place, or keep a borrowing diary. This need only be a sheet of paper with four columns:

Short title of book	Due back	Returned?	Date
The Cunning House	1.11.2016	✓	25.10.2016
Walking in Space for Beginners	5.11.2016		
How to Make Your First Million with Student Study Guides	17.11.2016		
I Conquered the World With My Guitar	18.11.2016		

You can see at a glance when your books are overdue. So long as you know what the current date is, nothing – in theory – can go wrong.

UG past papers and MA/PhD theses

If you're an MA or PhD student, you'll be pleased to know that university libraries store physical copies of successful theses. These may be indexed under a separate catalogue, though, so ask at the desk. As Open Access picks up momentum, universities are also making these documents available in electronic form. Added to which, the British Library's EThOS (e-theses online service) website is making thousands of doctoral theses from UK universities available for download as pdf files. You can browse here: http://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do. Reading other theses is a great way of checking presentation protocols, of seeing what topics are popular at the moment, and also of getting a realistic sense of the standard required to pass.

UG essays aren't made available in this way, but your library or department's e-learning portal will let you access electronic copies of past examination papers. These are invaluable revision tools: use them to familiarize yourself with the sort of questions you'll face in your own exams. Make a note of scope, focus, and indicative themes.

Working in the library

Many students choose to write their essays in the library because, in an odd way, being surrounded by other students toiling away is comforting. You might experience a sense of solidarity, or even make new friends. Perhaps someone will invite you to a party. Which leads me on to my next point …

Etiquette

The only thing worse than other people's kids are the ones who grow up to be other library users. In my day, the whole library was a quiet zone. Now, you have to traipse up to the top floor to find a place where you can hear yourself thunk. If you do find yourself working in the *Shhh!* zone, here's some advice about noise you might like to add to local rules and regulations:

Don't text and snigger at the replies.

Don't talk, but don't whisper either – it's equally annoying.

Don't write in books – posterity isn't interested.*

Don't sniff.

If you've got a cough, especially those dry, tickly ones, stay at home.

Don't wobble the table when you write.

Handing it in

So, you've made good use of the library, written a critically engaged, evaluative (not descriptive), conceptually attuned and clearly signposted essay, and are now ready to hand it in. Let me stop you there. Have you consulted your department's style guide and presentation check-list? Do so. Conventions might vary a little from institution to institution, but the following general rules will apply in most cases:

- Stick to one font throughout (12 point if it's a serif font such as Times New Roman; 11 point, if it's sans serif like Arial).

* Actually, people have written in books for centuries and sometimes their marginal comments are more interesting than the books themselves.

- Italicize, **OR** embolden, **OR** underline subheadings, but don't make more than one of these changes (e.g. don't italicize and underline your subheadings).
- Double-space your work: visually, it helps your reader considerably. (No, the gaps between lines don't look enormous and, in any case, they're what your tutor will be used to.)

Some parting advice

- The quietest periods to use the library are early in the morning and late in the evening. The laptop sockets will be free, and there's less chance of other readers using the books you wish to consult.
- If your library requires you to buy a photocopying card, keep it in your purse or wallet. There's only one thing more mentally destructive than walking to the library to do some copying and discovering you've left your copycard at home, and that's trying to buy a replacement for it at the counter, not having enough money, and *then* walking home to get the old one (which you can't find).
- Make use of your library's self-return system. It reduces queueing times for those who need to haggle about their fines.
- Allow yourself plenty of time. Things often take longer than you might expect in a library.
- Above all, remain calm. The Germans have a saying, 'in der Ruhe, liegt die Kraft', which, roughly translated, means 'you're stronger when you're calmer'. These are wise words to carry with you into the library.

Note:

1. Take advantage of **induction courses** explaining how your library works.
2. Find out **how to use** the library catalogues at your earliest convenience.
3. Avoid the paper chase by **thinking ahead**.
4. Keep a '**borrowing diary**'.
5. If you have to interface with an **'old-school' librarian**, don't take their rudeness to heart. You are star dust, you are golden.

Chapter 9

The undergraduate dissertation

Chapter 9

So you've almost finished your degree, and are about to go off and spend a year working with elephants. All your coursework has been handed in, bar the final-year dissertation, and you can fit that in around themed bar events and all-night MMORPG sessions, right? Again, let me stop you there. Whereas most of your assignments to this point will have been pitched somewhere between the 2,000- and 3,000-word mark, the undergraduate dissertation usually weighs in at 8,000-10,000 words. Doing well in this mode of assessment will entail more than simply producing extra wordage, as I'll explain in a moment. First, though, a quick word about the recent history of the UG diss, which will give you a crucial insight into what markers are looking for.

When the first edition of this guide appeared, Years 2 and 3 in a typical arts and humanities degree tended to look and feel very much the same, and were assessed by similar tasks – short coursework essays and exams. More recently, higher education institutions have come under pressure

to demonstrate 'progression' through their degree schemes. The basic idea is that a degree should give students the opportunity to build and develop their skills over three years, then demonstrate this development in a more challenging, larger-scale piece of work in their final year. Voilà, the UG diss!

All of which is to say, don't gull yourself into thinking the dissertation is merely an extended essay, or three 'normal' coursework essays stuck together (comforting as that image might be). Remember that key term, 'progression'. Your tutors are looking for a fully integrated piece of work, not a patchwork; for a long form, ideas-driven discussion; and for a more ambitious argument with plenty of conceptual momentum. They'll want to see evidence of close research, and will reward an assignment that's self-reflexive about its methodology (in other words, one that's thinking about *how* it's thinking about the issues at stake). It's an opportunity for you to embolden and enlarge your repertoire. The challenge of the dissertation can be subdivided into three main areas: (1) architecture/structure; (2) research and methodology; (3) concepts and ideas. I'll be covering all three in this chapter.

Your institution will support you as you plan, draft and complete your dissertation. These days, the UG diss usually constitutes a module in its own right, credit-weighted more heavily than standard Core or Option modules, and is structured around individual and group supervision meetings. A word of advice: in group meetings, don't hold back when you're invited to give your top tips, share helpful resources, or talk about how you negotiated a particular challenge. The value of group supervisions depends on all students contributing fully. Remember, you're not in competition with each other – there's no constraint on how many good marks can be handed out. Share, and you'll all do well. By the same token, you don't want to be the one who freeloads, takes but doesn't give, cribs but offers nothing. In my experience, this advice holds true for life in general.

A great deal of effort goes into supporting students through this final piece of assessment; after all, it represents the culmination of your studies. So it never ceases to amaze me how many of you skip supervisions, or come to them half-prepared. Would you turn up to a marathon after only previously having run a couple of 5k park runs? Would you give a half-hour talk in public based on a few notes scribbled down on the train?

(Er ...) Would you accept an invitation to play Chicago blues with a bunch of slick, semi-pro electric guitarists in a packed Berlin bar when you usually play unaccompanied Delta blues on an acoustic? (Let's leave that one there; it's still raw.) My point is, your institution's support sessions take you through all stages of the dissertation, from shaping the research questions to refining methodology, producing initial drafts, and getting the printed pages bound, and you should attend each and every one of them.

Supervisions

Where I work, the dissertation module gets going early in the Autumn semester. It begins with a couple of group sessions, where students turn up with drafts of a title and some broad research questions. At our first meeting, I ask each member of the class to describe their project to their neighbour, who then attempts to communicate the salient points back to the group as a whole. If the neighbour doesn't 'get' the argument, or isn't able to form an overall sense of the project, it may indicate that things are too vague, disconnected or loosely conceived. (Try this test on a friendly flatmate – it works.) In our second meeting, we discuss the difference between lamely descriptive writing and more evaluative, analytical, conceptualized discourse, much as I've done in previous chapters of this guide. We also discuss structure, subdivisions, choice of texts, pace and momentum, focus, scope, shape of argument, presentation and bibliographies – which are the areas I'll concentrate on now.

Scope

If you only discuss 'scope of argument' in your supervisions, it will have been worth making the effort to attend. One dissertation I marked recently set out to 'show how detective stories in the mid-nineteenth century are different from those in the second half of the century'. I'm not even joking. 80,000 words wouldn't have made a dent in such an enormous topic, let alone 8,000. If this student had attended their supervisions (I assume they didn't), this sprawling, poorly defined topic could have been narrowed down and re-focused. I've lost count of the times I've written a variation on the following at the bottom of UG dissertations:

> More tightly formulated and focused research questions would have strengthened your hand.

Speaks for itself. A more effectively designed project on Victorian detective fiction would have homed in on specific features within what is a very large body of literature. It might have looked at, say, representations of evolving police procedure, forensic investigation or models of criminal psychology; it might have addressed particular aspects of the detective figure (masculinity, moral ambiguity, and so on); it might have explored representations of urban as opposed to rural crime. You get the idea. The point is, the UG diss has to be do-able, or you're booking a first-class ticket to a world of pain. Work with your peers and your supervisor to shape a project you can actually touch the sides of, and bring to completion.

Titles

The process of narrowing down your project into something manageable feeds directly into finalizing the title. Up to this point in your degree, you'll usually have been given lists of essay questions to choose from. Now you need to develop your own title, which isn't as easy as it perhaps sounds. A good dissertation title needs to pull off the trick of being both enticingly conceptualized (that is, built around an idea) and helpfully descriptive. One tried and tested method for generating a title is 'short quotation, colon, what-it-says-on-the-tin'. Something along these lines:

> 'Trailing Clouds of Glory': Sentimentality and Constructions of Childhood in Romantic Poetry

So, I've started with a short quotation from Romantic poet, William Wordsworth – it's taken from his 'Intimations of Immortality' ode, which is one of the poems the dissertation will discuss. The second part of the title describes the project's range, scope and thematic concerns. As you may have noticed, the parts of the title before and after the colon are in conversation, since 'trailing clouds of glory' is an example of the 'sentimentality' the dissertation goes on to explore in Romantic poems about childhood. The title as a whole is perhaps a little on the long side. On the other hand, if we took out 'sentimentality', the Wordsworth quotation alone wouldn't necessarily provide the reader with all the

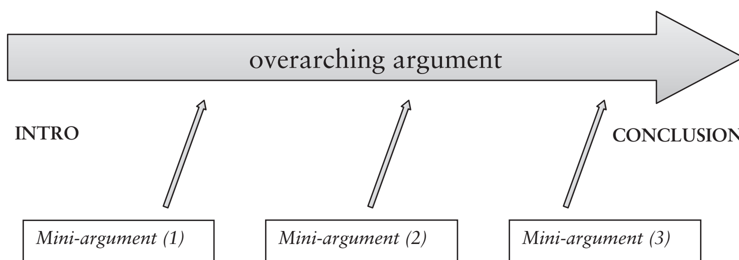
information they need to appreciate the dissertation's conceptual focus. 'Constructions' is a bit clunky, and we might consider replacing it with 'Representations'. The point is, the title should give your reader some momentum into your project, some sense of its trajectories.

Structure

There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to the most effective way of structuring a dissertation. Much depends on your topic and title, which may suggest its own architecture (see Chapter 2), as well as on the number of texts, themes or case studies you wish to explore. But one template that works well divides the 8,000 words into:

1 introduction (750–1,000 words)
2 three sections or mini-chapters (2,000 words each)
3 conclusion (750–1,000 words)

You might only have two mini-chapters, or you might need four, but this basic architecture is sound. It works particularly well when the standalone sections or mini-chapters also contribute to a larger evolving argument. We can visualize this kind of dissertation in the following diagram:



I'll have more to say about the relationship between the elements in the next section.

Focus

Let's say your overarching argument explores the development and growing diversity of the detective figure in nineteenth-century

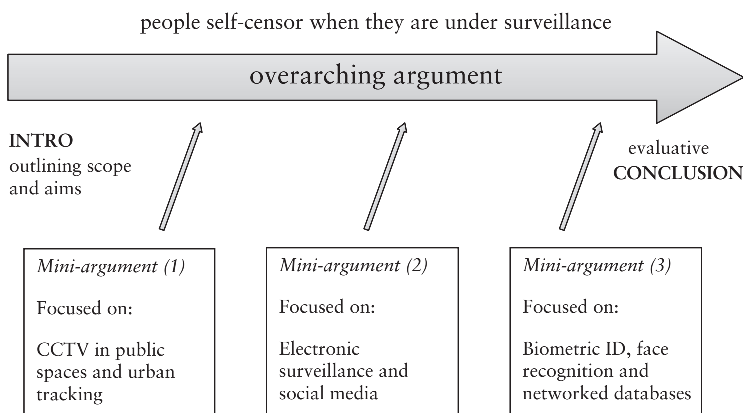
crime fiction. Your three mini-arguments (circa 2,000 words each) look at themes of masculinity, forensic techniques and moral ambiguity respectively. For your texts/detectives, you've chosen Edgar Allen Poe's three Dupin mysteries from the 1840s, Dickens's Inspector Bucket from *Bleak House* in 1852 and a couple of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories from the 1890s. So what's the best way to match texts to themes?

For a start, it's usually best to avoid matching one text (and here the novel *Bleak House*, your three Poe mysteries, and two Holmes stories each count as a single 'text') to one theme. That is to say, it's a good idea to resist using *Bleak House* to examine forensic techniques, Poe's stories to explore masculinity, and Doyle's to investigate moral ambiguity. It's far more impressive to demonstrate to your markers that you can keep more than one ball in the air at the same time, which means comparing and contrasting Dupin's, Bucket's and Holmes's use of forensic techniques, looking at all three detectives' performance of gender, and all three's relation to their age's moral codes. Don't forget that we're also linking each mini-argument to our overarching discussion of developments in detective fiction across this period of literary history. These links need only be a sentence or two indicating how the conclusions arrived at in your mini-sections help push and refine the larger-scale argument about the genre from the 1840s to the 1890s.

A comparative, relational structure of this kind, which is attuned to conversations between the mini- and macro-arguments, will – by definition – be conceptualized. By contrast, dissertations that offer little more than a series of barely connected sections, whose discussions are conducted on one level and limited to one text, and whose different areas of focus might therefore seem arbitrarily selected, often struggle to build conceptual or logical momentum towards an integrated conclusion.

Now we understand how the elements of our diagram relate to each other, let's change topic from detective fiction to social surveillance, and add some detail to our basic template. (You can refer to the following example when designing the architecture of your own dissertation.) This time, our project sets out to argue that state eavesdropping of all electronic communications has a socially chilling effect – that people self-censor when they think their emails, browsing history, texts, and phone and video calls are being intercepted. This overarching, macro-argument is fed by

three stand-alone micro-arguments, each of which considers different aspects of surveillance in public and private contexts. Now an English dissertation might use a corpus of novels or plays as 'evidence' for each micro-argument, while a History dissertation might work with case studies or historical documents. Equally, a social sciences essay might focus on different contexts of surveillance (as below), matching these contexts to a group of texts, case studies or historical documents. The fundamental advice about keeping more than one ball in the air at a time applies to all, though. So let's see how our dissertation on surveillance might look schematically:



We have a precisely defined macro-argument (which the title should chime with), and three micro-arguments, each of which is clearly relevant to developing our larger thesis. It's elegant, and it works. (Refer to this guide's chapters on introductions and conclusions for more detail on those elements.) Simples.

Subheadings

Use subheadings for your mini-chapters. Well-chosen subheadings help the reader make the mental shift to your new point of focus. Subheadings also enable markers to locate themselves in the larger argument, and gauge its trajectories. Again, the 'short quotation, colon, what-it-says-on-the-tin' formula is handy. For instance, a good subtitle for our *mini-argument (3)* above might be '"Surveillant Assemblages": The Social Impacts of

Networked Databases'. The short quotation is a theorized phrase from critics Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson, who identify algorithmic networked databases as a surveillant phenomenon capable not only of selecting people on the basis of particular attributes (height, eye colour, name) but also of sorting them along political or ideological lines (according to preferences and behavioural trends expressed in online activity). You can find their influential research in *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51 (2000), 605–22.

Choice of texts

Aim to collect a corpus of texts for discussion that are related in terms of thematic focus (three texts, say, that all explore class tensions in urban settings), and which also stand in some sort of chronologically meaningful relation. For instance, you might choose three closely grouped 'condition of England' novels from the 1850s. Equally, you might decide to evaluate a wider span of literary history in order to examine the development of specific techniques or themes. You might, that is, select three vampire novels, John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). On the other hand, a 'marriage plot' novel from the 1790s, one on same-sex desire from the 1930s and a contemporary spy thriller are unlikely to be in compelling dialogue (unless your topic is 'love triangles in spy novels' – and even then …).

Be wary, that is, about mixing genres, or choosing texts that are historically isolated from each other. You're more likely to produce a dissertation whose arguments seem overly quirky, forced or otherwise unconvincing.

Expressing yourself precisely

The advice I gave in previous chapters about saying exactly what you mean pertains here, only more so. Mixed in with 2,000 words of generally precise writing, a few infelicitous phrases, or passages where grammar comes adrift, can be tolerated by your reader. Think about it in terms of an aeroplane encountering the odd isolated patch of turbulence, then flying beyond into clear skies. If the writing's opaque or confusing across 8,000 words, however, that plane's going down.

Here's an example from a dissertation that you'll be pleased to know touched down safely in the end, but which would have achieved a better mark if it had communicated its points more clearly.

> Since the rise of children's literature in the eighteenth century, authors have adopted the practice of centring their storylines on animals in their works. By giving them depth of personality, the reader is enabled to not only identify, but in some instances relate to the characters therein.

Pull up! Pull up!

Let's look at the passage more closely. The second sentence begins with a hanging participle that appears to suggest the 'reader', rather than 'authors', gave literary 'animals' their 'depth of personality'. Added to which, you have to hunt a bit for the antecedent noun phrase that's linked to the old-fashioned 'therein' at the end of the excerpt (I suppose it's 'their works'). Finally, the first sentence appears to suggest that the storylines of all children's literature from the eighteenth century onwards are centred on animals. Quite a raft of problems for just two sentences! It's worth going through your work several times, resolving any ambiguities that are likely to make your reader feel less well disposed towards you.

Bibliographies

Anything you've merely flicked through during the course of reading around your subject should go in your bibliography, but don't try to make up for an under-researched project by packing your bibliography with books you've only skimmed. It won't fool anyone. As far as structuring the bibliography goes, you can divide your items into 'primary' sources (your main authors' novels, poems, plays, letters) and 'secondary' critical sources, or you can mingle the two categories, listing them alphabetically. (Refer back to Chapter 7 for alphabetizing.) Both ways of organizing your bibliographical sources are fine, unless your institution expresses a preference for one over another.

Remember, the purpose of the bibliography – aside from proving you've done the legwork – is to help readers follow up research leads for themselves, so clarity and consistency are paramount.

Presentation

Check your department's local regulations, but you can't go far wrong by double-spacing your work, using Times New Roman in 12-point, and italicizing subheadings. You can use footnotes or endnotes. Whichever you choose, though, remember that footnote and endnote markers – typed in superscript – should be placed at the end of sentences wherever possible, after the final punctuation, never just before. This point might seem trivial to you, but your tutors will be used to reading published critical essays where footnote markers always appear after the full stop. If yours come before, each misplaced marker will steadily undercut your dissertation's authority.

Proof-reading

Budget enough time for putting your work aside for a few days before the final editing session. Casting a cold eye, to borrow from the poet Yeats, over your work enables you to spot things you might otherwise miss. In the eighteenth century, Dr Johnson even recommended that all 'finished' compositions be locked away in a drawer for seven years! If they still seemed good after that time, they might then, and only then, be considered for publication. Since most degrees are three or four years in length, you can't follow Johnson's advice to the letter, but you can certainly adhere to its spirit. Leave your essay for a day or two, then read through it, highlighting as you go any bits that seem odd, badly phrased, or just plain bonkers. Then go back and make the necessary changes.

The final print-out

If your institution asks you to submit a hard copy of your essay, the best advice I can offer is to allow yourself a whole day just for printing – things invariably go wrong. When Shakespeare wrote 'Mischief, thou art afoot!' in *Julius Caesar*, he could have had the final print-out in mind. Quite aside from problems beyond your control – central printers breaking down or running out of toner when there's no one at the helpdesk, or bazillions of students with similar deadlines to yours jamming the printer's queueing system – you'll also start noticing lots of hitherto unseen errors in

your work. This might be down to wayward formatting or spelling mistakes (don't be too proud to use the spell-checker!); or it might be a case of your printer suddenly not recognizing special characters such as umlauts (ä, ö, ü), and reproducing them as squares or triangles, or even – and this is particularly bitter – smileys ☺.

Whatever the nature of the problem, be prepared for the fact that there will be problems, and leave enough time to cater for all eventualities. At my institution, you can get your dissertation bound in the library; they require three working days' notice, which is probably fairly standard. You can also get it done 'in town', of course. The point is, make sure you factor in enough time for this final task.

Feedback

I began by talking about the supervision sessions that typically accompany UG dissertation modules. These sessions are organized around what we in the trade call 'formative' feedback: that is, feedback designed to help shape and form your thinking as you go along. 'Summative' feedback, on the other hand, is attached to a final mark, and tells you what earned you credit, and what didn't. Now, Stephen Hawking wouldn't discount the possibility of a parallel universe in which different laws of time allow you to receive summative feedback on your dissertation in advance of submitting it. In the absence of a Holly Hop Drive to get you there, however, the following paragraphs are your best hope.

While preparing this chapter, I've been grading UG dissertations. You may find it helpful to read a few excerpts from my summative comments, particularly those that relate to secondary sources, structure, methodology, critical terminology, presentation and style. Here we go, then. Strap yourselves in:

1. Your introduction would have benefited from a closer engagement with existing critical debates and the theoretical terminology associated with your field. Make sure you establish your methodology from the outset.
2. You define your project rather imprecisely. Aim for a tighter opening section that locates the reader in the larger trajectories of your argument.
3. Avoid describing characters and plotlines (e.g. 'Mrs Price rejects her role as mother to Fanny, causing Fanny to feel

isolated'). Instead, analyse and evaluate your material. When you engage with Adrienne Rich's study, you immediately develop a more ideas-driven relation to your argument, addressing the issue of 'substitute mothers' who sometimes take the 'form of men'. This is much more interesting!

4 There are quite a few typos in this manuscript. Cumulatively, errors of this kind undermine your authority.
5 Avoid telling the reader basic things such as who Sherlock Holmes and Arthur Conan Doyle were. Assume your reader knows. Keep your discussion analytical, evaluative and conceptualized, rather than descriptive.
6 At times, your critical vocabulary needs refining. 'Somehow overdone and a little bit too dramatic' (discussing the ending of *Dorian Gray*) isn't quite adequate.
7 Remember to place footnote markers at the end of sentences, after the final punctuation. Further to that point, your footnotes are rather idiosyncratic, with many inconsistencies and frequent formatting errors.
8 Halfway in, I began to lose sight of the red line through your argument. Make sure you provide signposts at key junctures.
9 You engage with a wide range of critics, but would have strengthened your hand by offering counter-positions of your own. For example, after citing Drew Lamonica on page 15, you might have responded to her point about 'domestic enclosure', rather than simply enlisting her in illustrative mode (i.e. 'As critic X argues …'), and moving on.

To elaborate on extract 9, the student in question included a longish indented quotation from Lamonica's work, but made no attempt to 'talk back' to it. Tapping out an extract from a scholarly article or book is only the first stage in demonstrating a robust engagement with secondary sources. You need to say why you thought the critical extract important enough to warrant reproducing at length.

To end, here are some comments outlining positive qualities that you should aim to elicit from your marker:

1 You offer a conceptually attuned, ideas-driven piece of work, which I enjoyed reading.

2 You write well about the figure of the governess in *Jane Eyre*, using co-texts and historically adjacent sources to support your approach.
3 You bring Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* and Emerson's essay 'Nature' into productive apposition, offering a richly theorized discussion that is attuned to suggestive continuities and contrasts.
4 You build conceptual momentum across your three sections, and push towards cogent, developed and generally satisfying conclusions.
5 This ambitious, ideas-driven and articulate project offers an acute, tightly focused argument around imperialism and constructions of monstrosity in *She*, *Carmilla* and *Frankenstein*. Well done.

Chapter 10

How to write exam essays

Chapter 10

The exam essay differs from a coursework assignment both in terms of how it is written and marked. That it is written differently should be fairly obvious. In a timed exam, you can't mull things over at leisure, rootle around in the library, or type up your thoughts neatly. Instead you have two hours or so in which to write, under strict exam conditions, like the proverbial clappers. But the exam essay also tends to be marked differently. By that, I mean lecturers these days have a terrible time of things during the exam period, when they face tsunami-sized waves of answer booklets, each containing two or three separate essays. It's difficult for lecturers to spend as long scrutinizing individual exam scripts as they would like to in an ideal world.

That is not to say that exam essays are not graded properly or fairly. On the contrary. It is just that different factors come into play when they are assessed, as markers look for readily recognizable 'identifiers' of an exam script's standard that will help them arrive at a grade swiftly. Now,

just imagine someone were to tell you what these factors were – wouldn't it make your life easier?

But let's not put the cart before the horse. Let's start off by discussing the weeks leading up to the exam.

Preparation

There *is* such a thing as 'over-preparation'. The concept is not just a myth put about by students who prefer to study the effects of alcohol consumption on the human body, using themselves as control subjects, rather than revise fiscal policy in the court of Henry VIII, or discourse analysis in fan fiction. 'Over-preparation' is a problem you need to take seriously. One of the worst things you can do in your revision period is do too much. It is entirely counter-productive. Your body just enters a state of permanent panic and you can't revise properly. Then, because you can't revise properly, you get panicky, and try to do too much, and a vicious circle forms.

A successful programme of revision reflects the fact that periods of doing nothing at all are as important as those spent in intense study. I would go so far as to say that one does not work properly without the other. Think of it as the Yin and the Yang – apparently opposing forces that are actually complementary. Rather than 'cramming' every minute of the day, draw up a loose study schedule that reflects this philosophy of harmony and balance. Try working for two hours in the morning (say, between 9 and 12), two in the afternoon (between 1 and 4), and two in the evening (between 5 and 8), and see what happens. What you do in the rest of the time is up to you – but don't feel that you can't go out and relax. Stay away from Bier Keller-themed evenings in the Student Union, perhaps, but feel free to take in a movie, go jogging or dress up in chain mail and re-enact a medieval battle (why do students love that so much?). In my experience, students who best fulfil their potential in exams are those who manage to retain a sense of perspective and humour. Go out for a drink, call on a friend. The thought of a reward in the evening acts as an incentive to work hard during the day.

Everyone revises differently, of course. If you already have a tried and tested method of revision, why change it? If it ain't broke, don't fix it, as the old adage goes. On the other hand, preparing for a degree is not the same as revising for GCSEs or

A levels. At school the emphasis was on showing how much you could *remember*. In higher education, the name of the game is showing how much you can *think*. And in order to think, you need to be relaxed – which is impossible if you're desperately cramming all the time.

Let me just reiterate: there's no right or wrong way to prepare for examinations. Many cats lead to Rome, and all that. But there are certainly some common pitfalls you would do well to avoid. To begin with, many students spend weeks memorizing coursework essays verbatim in the hope that they will be able to regurgitate them in the examination. You are unlikely to live long and prosper with this approach. Apart from the likelihood of infringing the rubric (the rules of the exam) by repeating work already submitted, you will almost certainly end up with a secondhand essay that won't light any examiner's fire. So forget about shovelling facts and figures into your head with the intention of splurging them out later, and instead concentrate – just as you would in a piece of coursework – on making your work evaluative, conceptualized and analytical. (A-level students would also do well to follow this advice.)

Telling you to think, rather than regurgitate, in an exam is one thing. But what if you're sitting in the hall, and nothing comes? What if you blank? Don't worry, there are ways of minimizing the risk of that happening. Let's focus first on a framework for writing exam essays, which you can use to develop a discussion of pretty much *any* subject. Much better than banking on 'your' topic coming up.

Writing the exam essay

As I mentioned earlier, many examiners look for certain 'identifiers' as they mark that provide a rough indication of standard. For instance, if on the initial 'skim through' an essay displays evidence of a developed critical vocabulary and theoretical terminology, is clearly 'signposted', and engages with the critical debate (including a few names and short quotations), then an examiner will automatically be thinking in terms of awarding at least a 2.1 grade. Even if, when the essay is read more carefully, it doesn't quite live up to expectations, this initial impression lingers and can be of great help to you. Conversely, if none of these identifiers are evident, even if your basic ideas are good,

you'll find yourself battling against a pre-formed opinion that your essay is a 2.2 piece of work – pre-formed, because examiners know from experience that badly signposted essays, which lack a sophisticated critical vocabulary, and read as if they've been written from within a critical void, generally turn out to be of 2.2 standard.

Don't misunderstand me; I'm not suggesting that if you usually get 2.2 marks for your coursework you can somehow 'trick' your examiner into thinking you are a 2.1 student just by including a few 2.1 identifiers in your work. Not exactly. But you can certainly load the dice in your favour. After all, examiners normally mark 'blind' (that is, without knowing whose script they are reading). If the examiner doesn't know who you are, then you're free to be anyone you like. Put on a disguise, don an intellectual mask. There's no need to feel like a fraud or imposter, because if your essay contains 2.1 or first-class identifiers, then, for the purposes of the examiner, you *are* a 2.1 or first-class student. Where's the difference? As Gene Hackman's character in Clint Eastwood's classic film, *The Unforgiven*, says (more or less): 'If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, chances are it's a duck!'

Anyway, to return to our disguise metaphor, let's open the dressing-up box and put something on.

Positive and negative identifiers

The following elements can usually be found in the best scripts, so make sure they appear in yours:

- a succinct statement of aims in the introduction
- a sustained sense of purpose
- clear signposts and structure
- conceptual momentum
- sophisticated critical/theoretical vocabulary
- good grammar
- evidence of engagement with the critical debate
- a distinct 'voice' or personality
- 'Factor X'

Think of these elements as *positive* identifiers. By the same token, there are *negative* identifiers:

- a loose or rambling introduction
- no clear sense of purpose
- few or no signposts
- poor structure
- basic, undeveloped vocabulary
- no evidence that any critical works have been read
- plot-driven argument with lots of paraphrase
- no 'Factor X'

Handwriting

Before I consider each of these points, I'd like to say something briefly about handwriting. Whereas I don't believe handwriting is linked to character or ability (you ought to see mine!), joined-up, elegant writing tends to impress examiners more than bubbly letters or prototype. Without suggesting you change your handwriting, quite, there are a few tricks you might try. Perhaps the simplest is to swap from light-blue ink, or sparkly purple, to dark blue or black, as it gives an impression of gravitas. Many examiners are human beings and are thus vulnerable to psychological nudges when they mark. If black ink helps create an aura of authority, why not give it a go?

Remember that your handwriting is the interface between you and your reader. A barely legible paper won't do you any favours. If examiners wished to spend their time deciphering hieroglyphics, they'd move to Egypt and study the pyramids.

Right, let's talk in more detail about positive identifiers.

Positive identifiers

A succinct statement of aims in the introduction

Much of what I said in Chapter 1 applies here. As with any piece of coursework, it's vital in your exam essay that your reader gains an immediate impression of what you wish to discuss. Your opening paragraph should be decisive, internally coherent, and pithy (see Chapter 1 for practical examples). Robert Johnson may have had rambling on his mind in 'Steady Rollin' Man', but you shouldn't.

So before you start writing, sketch out a brief plan of your essay. Do this on the inside cover of your answer booklet. The

plan doesn't have to be neat; just jot down the key ideas you want to include in your discussion. Once you've done this, you'll have a better sense of what your essay is going to be about, and the general direction of your argument. You needn't know precisely where it's going to end up. Actually, it can be very liberating to work through an argument in 'real time' – and exciting for the reader.

At some point, though – and preferably soon – you're going to have to write your first sentence proper, and it can feel like one of the hardest things you'll ever do in your life. Precisely for this reason, it is useful to have a ready formula to hand. For instance:

> In this essay, I want to discuss ...
>
> This essay considers the ...
>
> The following discussion draws into focus ...
>
> My concern in this essay is to ...
>
> This essay attends to ...

Under exam conditions, these off-the-peg phrases can save a lot of time. They also have the advantage of taking you straight into your argument without any waffle. There's nothing worse than an introduction that meanders around haplessly, hoping that a point will emerge. I once read an exam essay from a student who wanted to explore the representation of women in John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. It began:

> John Milton was born in 1608 and died in 1674. He went blind towards the end of his life and worked as a propagandist for the King. He was very cruel to his daughters, who copied out his poetry for him as he couldn't see to do it himself. *Paradise Lost*, Milton's magnum opus, was written in 1667. It was implicated in the struggles leading up to the Civil War in England, and although Milton worked for the monarchy, the rebel Satan in his poem receives a much more sympathetic treatment than God, who could be identified with the crown. In the following argument, I want to discuss the figure of Eve, asking to what extent Milton treats her sympathetically.

Quite apart from the rather noticeable *non sequitur* in the second sentence (what's going blind got to do with working as a

propagandist for the King? Losing your mind, yes – but blindness?), the whole introduction is little more than a barely connected sequence of points that eventually alights on the figure of Eve. There's no argument; instead little bits of information have been dumped on the page. I can imagine what must have happened. In desperation, this candidate wrote down everything he or she could remember about Milton in the hope that an argument would materialize. Well, it didn't, and the essay received a low grade.

Better, though by not means perfect, is the following introduction from a History student who wrote on Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall:

> In November 1989, after a period in which Communism underwent a radical and far-reaching change from within, the wall dividing Berlin fell. Although global news footage presented the event as an example of 'people power', the decision not to turn back the crowds demanding reform had probably been made some time before, and behind closed doors. The mood of exuberance only survived the demise of the wall for a short while; by the early 1990s a grim sense of reality had settled as parity between the former eastern states and the rest of Germany seemed a long way off. In this essay, I want to explore the difficulties faced by citizens of the former DDR in the newly unified Germany.

This is fairly solid, taking exam conditions into account: we have a distinct narrative, each sentence follows on logically and coherently from the last, we get a clear statement of aims, and the passage is well written. Notice how this student has not always taken the obvious choice. The Berlin Wall becomes 'the wall dividing Berlin'; I also like 'mood of exuberance', and the ominous, if a little histrionic, 'a grim sense of reality had settled'. This student has paused to think about style, rather than simply pouring words out higgledy-piggledy.

Best, though, is this example, from a Nineteenth-Century Literature exam. The topic is 'surveillance', and the student has chosen to write on three Romantic poets:

> Hille Koskella has called twenty-first-century surveillance an 'emotional event' in which surveilled terrain is always 'emotional space'. British Romanticism, two hundred years ago,

> was already attuned to the conflation of mental and physical space in debates around privacy. In *The Spirit of Despotism*, published in 1795, and reprinted in 1822, Vicesimus Knox complained that the government's web of 'spies and informers' had corrupted the 'sequestered walks of private life'. Knox uses 'walks' metaphorically here, but in this essay my concern is with two actual walks from the period, one by William Wordsworth and Coleridge in Nether Stowey in 1798, which resulted in the 'Spy Nozy' incident; the other by John Keats around London in September 1819 to welcome the radical Henry Hunt back to the capital. I'm interested in these poets' emotional experience of physical surveillance, and will examine how it affects their writing.

The essay got a high first, you might not be surprised to learn. But there's nothing here that you can't do, having got this far in your writing guide. Let's break the passage down to its component virtues.

First of all, the introduction is conceptualized throughout. This student is not merely giving the examiner inert information (that Wordsworth and Coleridge were under surveillance in Devon while composing their joint collection, *Lyrical Ballads*, and that Keats walked among spies in London on the day political radical Henry 'Orator' Hunt returned to the capital to face trial for speaking at Peterloo). Far from it. This student is thinking *conceptually* about physical space, about surveilled space, and connecting it to textual space (that is, poems). Secondly – and this is what sets up the conceptualized approach – he or she has used two short quotations, one contemporary by Hille Koskella, and one from the Romantic period by Vicesimus Knox (pronounced *Vi-kes-i-mus*, if you're wondering), to home in on a particular form of movement through surveilled terrain: walking. Again, we're talking *ideas* here, rather than descriptive narrative.

The paragraph is also extremely well written. It deploys variations on three phrases we've already looked at in this book – 'my concern is with'; 'is attuned to'; 'I'm interested in' – and pulls out a lovely turn of phrase – 'the conflation of physical and mental space' – where 'conflation' is the perfect word to describe two things merging, or becoming the same. Other than that, there is no particularly difficult vocabulary here: the impression of a sophisticated terminology is achieved primarily through clear

thought and clear writing. As for the quotations, starting with the name of a critic is certainly bold, but here it's very effective. Who knows whether the quotations are actually accurate. They probably are, since they're short – and it's best to learn brief, pithy phrases from critics, rather than cramming whole sentences into your memory. But the point is, they leave an impression of thorough preparation, as well as a robust engagement with the wider critical debates (then and now) around the essay's topic.

A sustained sense of purpose

Resist the temptation in examinations to spew out everything you can remember from lectures and seminars. A good discussion is focused and relevant; it's much better to pare things down to a few main points and explore these in detail, than skim through lots of disconnected ideas. Your tutor is interested in quality, not quantity. Four sides of A4 per essay are ample (assuming you don't write three or four words to a line). Anything more than that often proves counter-productive. At any rate, the little tag you are given to join two exam answer booklets together is an object of fear and loathing among markers. Think of their autonomic nervous systems, and resist.

Always keep your main point – the one you return to in your conclusion – in the reader's field of vision. Compare the following two examples from our question on *Paradise Lost*. Both students wish to introduce new ideas into their discussion:

1 I now want to turn my attention to Satan's temptation of Eve beneath the Tree of Knowledge …

2 If Milton's treatment of his female protagonist up to this point has been at best tolerant, in the episode where Satan tempts Eve by the Tree of Knowledge a range of negative stereotypes emerge …

Look at the underlined section in the second example. At the same time as the new point is being introduced, the reader is reminded what this particular essay has set out to do: namely, explore Milton's representation of Eve in his poem. If you keep your 'target' point visible, linking back to it at salient points, your discussion will appear coherent and purposeful.

Finally, show the examiner you are in control of your material and have imposed order and structure on it. A tightly knit, well-marshalled argument never fails to impress in an exam essay, so don't allow yourself to get sidetracked. In coursework you might have time and space to follow interesting points off into the strawberry plants, but under exam conditions you need to be succinct and to the point.

Signposts to help the reader through the argument

The next positive identifier goes hand in hand with the one I've just discussed. To maintain a sense of purpose and order in your discussion, you need to let the reader know what is going on at key junctures. If you're about to introduce a new point, or connect an old to a new one, then say so – it reassures your reader that you know what you're doing (even if you don't).

For example, when you introduce a new point you might use the opportunity to take stock of what you have achieved so far in your essay (WARNING: don't overuse):

> To this point I have explored the interaction of X and Y; I now wish to ask to what extent Y can be considered as …

Or you might achieve the same effect with more expansive prose:

> As we have seen, Chancellor Konrad's right-wing government had a far from satisfactory policy towards ethnic minorities living in Germany. However, even with the handover of power to Schiller's purportedly left-of-centre party, things only changed slowly, if at all, as I now wish to discuss.

Clear signposts also help you to structure your essay, because they oblige you to be clear in your own mind about what each section of your discussion is doing, and how it relates to the argument as a whole. In other words, they'll keep you on topic.

Refer to Chapters 3 and 6 for more on good signposting.

Conceptual momentum

A conceptualized essay explores its materials in different contexts, brings various elements (e.g. texts, ideas, style) into evaluative

apposition, and thinks abstractly, laterally and synthetically. A key aim of your essay should be to push towards conceptualized conclusions, and for that you need to build up conceptual momentum. In short, this goal entails making your essay ideas-driven, rather than plot-based or information-centred.

Have another look at the introduction a few pages back on Romanticism and surveilled space. There are ideas galore in that single paragraph – about surveilled space being emotional space, about the collapsing of physical and textual space, about figurative and actual walks. It makes links between how surveillance is theorized across two time periods (Koskella and Knox), then relates Romantic writing to the findings. Simply by exploring the ideas set up in that first paragraph, the student in question will develop conceptual momentum – which is why it behoves you to make sure your opening section deals in ideas and concepts, rather than inert information. Try to link ideas as you analyse your material, and use signposts to clarify connections where they might not otherwise be apparent. Develop and refine your argument as you go along, relating individual sections and new focuses of interests to the concepts you outline at the beginning.

Developed critical/theoretical vocabulary

The best way to expand your critical vocabulary is to read criticism. Keep a notepad to hand to jot down useful terms and phrases, which you can recycle. It's what critics themselves do. No one used to 'map' the politics of a period onto anything (thank goodness!) – now *everyone* does it. A few years ago, there was a fad for saying that 'X' was 'always already' this or that. The expression was fun for about two minutes. (See Chapter 6 for more on how to develop a sophisticated critical terminology.)

Good grammar

It goes without saying that first-class work should be grammatical (see Chapter 5). Make sure that you leave yourself enough time at the end of the exam to read through your work, checking that everything makes sense. If your sentences seem to be saying something other than you intend, the chances are that the problem lies with poor grammar. Although you certainly don't want to keep crossing things out and correcting your exam script

until it resembles one of Beethoven's autograph scores – covered in blotches, whole sections etched out into oblivion – a small amount of tinkering could make a lot of difference.

Evidence of engagement with the critical debate

Students often ask me 'Should we use quotations in exams?' and I always reply, 'Hell, yeah!' If you want to talk about literature, you have to be able to draw on examples, otherwise everything becomes terribly hypothetical, abstract and detached. The same goes for quoting critics. Naturally, you don't want to cite reams of Professor Bigcheese or be overly deferent to Dr Internationalreputation. However, you do need to prove to your examiner that you have done more in your studies than simply carve 'Push Button To Abort Lecture' on auditorium armrests. (We have feelings, too, you know!) An essay devoid of reference to any criticism whatsoever will have to do something extraordinary to earn more than a low 2.2 mark.

There are good reasons for expecting you to show that you've interacted with recent criticism. To begin with, if you haven't read around your subject, you run the risk of spending an hour re-inventing the wheel, which is rather tiresome to read. What's more, you really ought to know what the current state of play is in your area. Just imagine a medical student trying to write a paper on organ transplant without having read anything written on the subject in the last twenty years. You would hope – indeed *expect* – them to fail their exams, wouldn't you? At the very least, you'd hope never to find yourself staring up at that particular individual from an operating table. So why should students of the humanities be surprised when they are marked down for not having read any critical works? OK, you probably won't be expected to transplant anyone's organs with a humanities degree. On the other hand, you are dealing with ideas in your essays, and ideas can change the world.

I realize it can be difficult to remember a critic's exact words. But even if you have only retained a broad sense of the quotation, stick it between two sets of inverted commas, and give the title of the book you think you remember having seen it in. Who's going to schlep to the library and check up on you? In an exam, it's more important that you give the *impression* of being *au fait* with your material than agonizing over questions of bibliographical accuracy.

Remember, a quotation or two will lend your opinions more authority. Which looks better?

> Keats's first year's work as a poet owes much to his literary mentor, Leigh Hunt.

Or:

> Keats's first year's work as a poet owes much to his literary mentor, Leigh Hunt. As Jeffrey N. Cox says, 'Keats's early work … insists upon his links to Hunt' (p. 89).

'Nuff said. Incidentally, I *do* remember where I read this quotation – in Jeff Cox's book, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). And very good it is, too.

A distinct 'voice' or personality

It can take a whole degree course to develop a critical voice. However, a few judiciously placed personal interjections, such as 'I want to consider …' or 'in my essay I wish to explore …', can give the impression that you're further down this road than you may actually be. Avoid overusing passive constructions (e.g. 'in this essay it will be shown …'), because it makes you sound like a Cylon from *Battlestar Galactica* (first series). You can inject a lot of life into an essay just by reminding the reader every so often of the fact that there is a personality behind the discussion. I talk more about 'finding your voice' in Chapter 6.

'Factor X'

I'm referring to that indefinable something, that elusive *je ne sais quoi*, that makes an essay stand out from the others around it. Perhaps the best word to describe it is 'panache' or 'flair', since 'Factor X' is more of an attitude than anything else. It's a little like self-confidence: some days you have it, some days you don't, but your best chance of finding 'Factor X' when you need it is to enter the exam, not in the hope that you might just do enough to slip past the sentries, but with the express purpose of *claiming* the 2.1 or first that is rightfully yours. Open a can of 'whup-ass' on the exam.

Negative identifiers

Most of the negative identifiers I included in my list on pages 126–7 are defined in opposition to the positive identifiers I have just been discussing, and don't require further explication here. However, there are two negative identifiers that deserve to be considered in their own right. The first, the plot-driven script, is more or less specific to English (and possibly History) essays.

Plot-driven answers

In these sorts of papers the argument seems dictated to by the plot of the novel or play under consideration. Such essays seldom do well. In an examiner's eyes, good students should be able to step outside a plot, or sequence of historical events, to consider larger issues – that is, those not directly concerned with what happens to whom, and in which order. Let's imagine someone has chosen to write on the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. This character is the key to a number of intriguing discussions, and an able student would want to use him to open a few doors. A less confident student, on the other hand, might be more preoccupied with what the Fool said to Gloucester, what Gloucester said back, and so on. This is dangerous ground – metaphorically speaking, you are standing on the near bank of the river Styx, where a bloke called Charon is offering to ferry you across to the other side for a small fee.

Paraphrase

Paraphrase is when you merely tell the story in your own words, perhaps without realizing that this is what you are doing. Once this happens (to continue the metaphor), you are already floating down that river, wondering why it got so dark all of a sudden.

Paraphrase is a sure identifier of weak work. Desperate students, who find they can do no more with a text than relate what happens in it, often try to present paraphrase as argument, but examiners are never fooled. If you have a legitimate reason for telling the story (perhaps you're comparing two slightly different editions of a novel, clarifying some problematic aspect of plot, or providing a brief summary of a little-known novel), then make absolutely sure your reader knows what this reason is. Otherwise

it will be assumed that you're floundering and trying to find ways to fill the page.

Final words

I've never forgotten the advice my old English professor gave me when I was an undergraduate. He said that writing exam essays was a lot like playing cricket. You have to make a choice between two types of stroke. Either you play a firm defensive shot to avoid being bowled out, in which case the best you can hope for is a solid 2.1 mark, or you play the haymaker. Going for the haymaker involves taking an almighty swing at the ball. If you miss (and that's the danger with this kind of shot), you'll overbalance and fall flat on your face, and everyone will laugh. But if you make contact …

In other words, nothing ventured, nothing gained. *Carpe diem*, seize the day! Don't be afraid to take risks. Remember, fortune favours the brave!

Above all HAVE FUN! It's only an exam.

Note:

1. Think about preparation: **how** you revise is as important as **what** you revise.
2. Include **positive identifiers** in your work.
3. In an examination **you can be anybody you like**: masquerade as a first-class student, and you might just end up with a first-class mark.

And that's really all there is to it.

Off you go, off into life. Remember, be kind to one another. The humanities teach us fellowship and sociability, and some of your peers' struggles with the world might be more complex than you know, or can imagine.

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