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# Academic writing: the essay

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## Academic writing: the essay



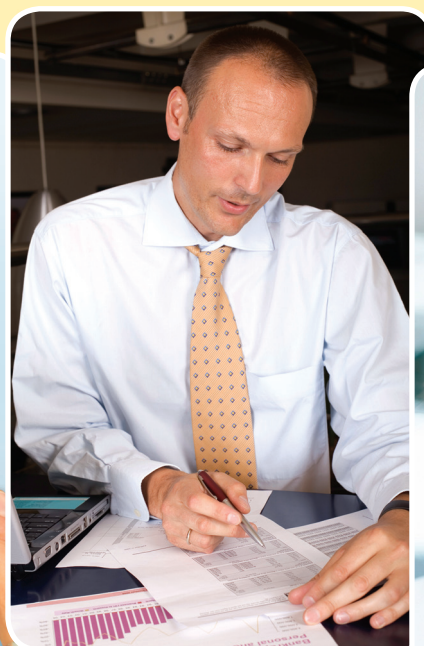
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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

*After reading this chapter you should be able to:*

- List at least three criteria of excellence in critical thinking as expressed in academic writing
- Explain the difference between fact and opinion, and explain why it is necessary to use both in essay writing
- Identify sources of bias and imbalance in the presentation of an argument
- Explain structural and layout features of the essay form
- Explain the importance of thesis statements and topic sentences
- Identify several major faults in poor essay writing



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# Essay writing

'The essay is a form of refined torture. Discuss.' You almost certainly will never encounter such an essay topic, but you might think it. Don't. The essay is simply a document that adheres to certain rules, strategies and stylistic conventions, all of which can be learnt and mastered.

Let's get down to basics. Almost certainly, you want to write not merely satisfactory essays but exceptional ones that score high marks. What is it, then, that your audience or reader wants (given that in academic situations your work is likely to be read by just one person – your lecturer or tutor)? What criteria will this reader apply when allocating marks or grades?

## What makes a good or bad essay?

Table 7.1 offers an insight into the criteria for success or failure in essay writing. If you are scoring fours in your work, then you are more or less satisfying the criteria; if you are scoring ones, twos or threes, then you are not satisfying the criteria.

**TABLE 7.1** Critical thinking scoring guide

Score	Criteria
4	<p>Consistently does all or almost all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Accurately interprets evidence</li> <li>■ Identifies the salient arguments for and against</li> <li>■ Thoughtfully evaluates alternative points of view</li> <li>■ Draws justified conclusions based on clearly explained reasons</li> <li>■ Accurately and appropriately uses and/or cites source material</li> <li>■ Presents ideas in a coherent, clear and technically correct manner.</li> </ul>
3	<p>Does most or many of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Accurately interprets evidence</li> <li>■ Identifies relevant arguments pro and con</li> <li>■ Offers evaluations of alternative points of view</li> <li>■ Draws justified conclusions based on some evidence</li> <li>■ Accurately and appropriately uses and/or cites source material</li> <li>■ Presents ideas in a coherent, clear and technically correct manner.</li> </ul>
2	<p>Does most or many of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Misinterprets evidence</li> <li>■ Fails to identify salient arguments for and against</li> <li>■ Superficially evaluates alternative points of view</li> <li>■ Draws unjustified conclusions based on little evidence</li> <li>■ Maintains or defends views based on self-interest or preconceptions, regardless of the evidence</li> <li>■ Inaccurately or inappropriately uses and/or cites source material</li> <li>■ Fails to present ideas in a coherent, clear and technically correct manner.</li> </ul>
1	<p>Consistently does all or almost all the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Offers biased interpretations of evidence</li> <li>■ Fails to identify or dismisses relevant arguments for and against</li> <li>■ Ignores alternative points of view</li> <li>■ Draws irrelevant or unjustified conclusions</li> <li>■ Exhibits closed-mindedness or hostility to reason</li> <li>■ Inaccurately or inappropriately uses and/or cites source material</li> <li>■ Fails to present ideas in a coherent, clear and technically correct manner.</li> </ul>

Source: Blattner and Frazier (2002, p. 63).



These criteria for success are not arbitrary, or simply tools of torture to make life hard; rather, they are effective benchmarks against which a sustained argument can be tested – helping us to evaluate the mix of fact and opinion advanced in an effective piece of writing (or for that matter in an effective oral presentation). Switch roles for a minute: imagine that it is you who comprises the audience, and that someone else is trying to persuade you to:

1. change your mind and agree with them
2. give them money
3. help them out.

It probably makes sense for you, in the role of critical evaluator, to impose criteria upon which to assess what you are reading or hearing, and your criteria would probably be quite similar to those listed in table 7.1.

## Essays: form and content

Essays are documents on specific topics that contain a mix of fact and opinion, laid out in logical sequences and employing appropriate strategies of expression. An essay comprises both content (what is said) and form (the way in which it is said). These aspects are separate, but not unrelated.

Let's take an example of an essay. Francis Bacon, one of the earliest users of the essay form, tackled a wide variety of topics. Here's one he wrote on that most basic of human impulses, revenge. The language and punctuation is that of 1625, but a modern reader can follow it without too much difficulty, and even after almost four centuries most of us can recognise what he was writing about.

### An example: Francis Bacon's essay on revenge

Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong, putteth the law out of office.

Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; for it is a prince's part to pardon. And Solomon, I am sure, saith, 'It is the glory of a man, to pass by an offence.' That which is past is gone, and irrevocable; and wise men have enough to do, with things present and to come; therefore they do but trifle with themselves, that labor in past matters. There is no man doth a wrong, for the wrong's sake; but thereby to purchase himself profit, or pleasure, or honor, or the like. Therefore why should I be angry with a man, for loving himself better than me? And if any man should do wrong, merely out of ill-nature, why, yet it is but like the thorn or briar, which prick and scratch, because they can do no other. The most tolerable sort of revenge, is for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy; but then let a man take heed, the revenge be such as there is no law to punish; else a man's enemy is still before hand, and it is two for one. Some, when they take revenge, are desirous, the party should know, whence it cometh. This is the more generous. For the delight seemeth to be, not so much in doing the hurt, as in making the party repent. But base and crafty cowards, are like the arrow that flieth in the dark. Cosmus, duke of Florence, had a desperate saying against perfidious or neglecting friends, as if those wrongs were unpardonable: 'You shall read (saith he) that we are commanded to forgive our enemies; but you never read, that we are commanded to forgive our friends.' But yet the spirit of Job was in a better tune: 'Shall we (saith he) take good at God's hands, and not be content to take evil also?' And so of friends in a proportion. This is certain, that a man that studieth revenge, keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal, and do well. Public revenges are for the most part fortunate; as that for the death of Caesar; for the death of Pertinax; for the death of Henry the Third of France; and many more. But in private revenges, it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches; who, as they are mischievous, so end they infortunate.

## Explanatory notes

*Solomon*: Tenth century BC king of Israel. His willingness to forgive, and not take revenge, is shown in, for example, 2 Chronicles 1:11.

*Cosmus*: Cosimo de Medici or Cosimo ‘the Elder’ (1389–1464), first of the Medici family to rule the Italian city-state of Florence.

*Job*: Biblical character in the Book of Job, Job 2:10.

*Caesar*: Gaius Julius Caesar, 100–44 BC. Roman general and emperor, assassinated by Brutus and Cassius and others, who feared Caesar was intent on becoming a dictator of the Roman empire.

*Pertinax*: Publius Helvius Pertinax, AD 126–193. Roman emperor, who ruled for 87 days. Killed by his own soldiers over a controversy about soldiers’ pay.

*Henry III*: 1551–1589, king of France (1574–89); son of Henry II and Catherine de’ Medici. Involved in the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century, he was killed by a Dominican monk who feared that Henry would recognise a Protestant successor.

## Bacon’s approach

Many ideas are packed into the 454 words of this essay. In most writing, there is a link between content and form or style, and this is certainly the case with Bacon’s essay.

He makes a number of key points, many of which are further broken down into sub-points that are dialectically linked – that is, he sets out opposing arguments (on the one hand this, and on the other hand that). Table 7.2 shows how this structure is created.

**TABLE 7.2** Structure of Bacon’s essay ‘On revenge’

Key point	First part	Second part
Revenge is a kind of wild justice	The more man’s nature runs to revenge ...	... the more ought the law to weed out that tendency in man.
Relationship of original wrong to revenge for the wrong	The first wrong merely offends the law.	The revenge taken for the wrong undermines the authority of the law itself.
Taking revenge or not taking revenge: relationships with our enemies	By taking revenge, a man shows that he is on the same level as his enemy.	By not taking or by passing over revenge, man shows that he is superior to his enemy. Example of Solomon.
Revenge and time present, past and future	Wise men have enough to do worrying about the present and the future without being stuck in the past, which is what thinking about revenge does.	Those who are stuck in the past, preoccupied with revenge, waste their time.
Motivation for wrongdoing	No-one does wrong for wrong’s sake.	Men do wrong because it will profit them, or give them pleasure, or save their honour, and for other reasons.
Futility of being angry with others	If another man merely loves himself better than he loves me, that is not a good enough reason for my being angry.	If a man should do wrong because it is his nature to do so, then he cannot help it.
Revenge and the law	Revenge is acceptable when the law does punish wrongdoers.	We need to be careful when we take revenge, because the law might punish us for doing so, and that would mean that our enemies would triumph.

1. Main antithesis has minor antithesis nested within it.

2. Main antithesis has minor antithesis nested within it.

Key point	First part	Second part
<b>1</b> Revenge-taking: open and concealed styles	Some take revenge openly, and this is the more worthy approach.	Some take revenge in a base and crafty way.
Motivation of open-style revenge-takers	These revenge-takers seem to take more satisfaction in making the guilty party repent ...	... than in inflicting pain on the guilty party.
<b>2</b> Forgiveness and our friends	Cosmus advises us not to forgive our friends.	But Job advises us that we must take the evil with the good in our friends (to a certain extent).
Cosmus's paradoxical maxim	The Bible commands that we forgive our enemies (e.g. Mark 11:26: 'But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your sins.') ...	... but you never read that we are commanded to forgive our friends.
Revenge and wounds	The man who studies revenge keeps his wounds green, or unhealed, and thus does badly.	The man who does not study revenge lets his wounds heal, and does well.
Public and private revenges	Public revenges for the most part lead to good fortune: it made sense to kill Caesar (who was intent on becoming a dictator), Pertinax (who withheld his soldiers' pay) and Henry III (who it was feared would recognise a Protestant successor to the French throne).	Private revenges for the most part lead to misfortune.
Vindictive people and consequences	Vindictive people are like witches ...	... but the mischief caused by witches brings down consequences on them.

This approach serves a number of purposes:

1. It shows that extreme opinions can sometimes miss the point unless we become aware of the relationships between apparently opposed ideas.
2. It allows us to see the paradoxical nature of reality.
3. It sets up a pleasing rhythm in the exposition of ideas.

Bacon's essay can tell us much more about an effective approach to essay writing. For example:

**Point of view:** a stance or position; the expression of an opinion and the backing up of that opinion

**Assertions:** a specific line of reasoning, using specific arguments or claims

**Proofs and examples:** evidence to substantiate assertions

**Expositional technique:** the development of a structure of propositions that can be easily followed by a reader

- **Point of view.** Do we know what Bacon believes? Yes, we do. He takes a position, states his opinion and backs up that opinion with clear arguments. Bacon advocates a broad philosophical view: that not only is revenge unproductive, but it will hurt those who pursue it.
- **Assertions.** Bacon follows certain specific lines of reasoning, using specific arguments. He develops the viewpoint that certain acts of revenge or killing are justified, but that in most cases it harms both victim and perpetrator.
- **Proofs and examples.** Bacon draws on historical evidence and authorities to substantiate his assertions.
- **Expositional technique.** Bacon develops the structure of his argument by using an explicit pattern that the reader can follow without difficulty. He uses a double, or antithetical, structure at the main level of argument and occasionally branches into a subsidiary, or nested, level:

*Major point.* Revenge-taking – open and concealed styles

*Minor point.* Motivation of open-style revenge-takers

**Cumulative method:** the construction of one argument upon another, creating momentum and building up a persuasive sequence of reasoning

*Major point.* Forgiveness and our friends

*Minor point.* Cosmus's paradoxical maxim

- **Cumulative method.** Bacon constructs one argument upon another, creating momentum and building up a persuasive sequence of reasoning, using junction points or transitions ('for', 'certainly', 'therefore', 'but', 'else', 'nay') to set up cause-effect linkages, reinforcement points and contrasts.

## ASSESS YOURSELF

### Analysing the essay structure

Locate print or internet sources of great historical essayists such as Francis Bacon, Michel de Montaigne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Samuel Johnson and Mark Twain. For the sake of analysis, try to restrict yourself to essays under 1500 words in length. Create photocopies or printouts of a single essay to begin with, or edit on screen. Deconstruct or dissect the composition of the argument into points, and attempt to see how the points are linked. Using a highlighter pen on hard copy, break up the text into blocks, or alternatively break it into paragraphs on screen. If appropriate, use the format of table 7.2 to assess the structure. If you find this is not an appropriate approach, that in itself is an interesting conclusion.

## Essay method

A contemporary academic essay will necessarily take a different form from the essay that Bacon wrote in the seventeenth century. For example, typical academic essays today rely more on using quoted sources to bolster their arguments, and are expected to cite full details of those sources in a bibliography or reference list. Nevertheless, certain elements are timeless, such as the creation and sustaining of an argument that makes sense. Better to have an essay with a strong argument, but without a single reference, than an essay with an elaborate bibliography and extensive use of quotation that is, in essence, nonsense.

## Fact versus opinion: just what is it you have to say?

Your audience wants to know what you think – that is, your point of view. It is not enough, however, simply to assert a series of opinions: as in a courtroom or a science symposium, you need to prove what it is you are asserting. That means that opinions must rest on a bedrock of facts and data. That, in turn, means that you need to research your topic. As Arthur Conan Doyle's creation Sherlock Holmes puts it, 'I never guess. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts' (Doyle 1994 [1892]). (Contrast this view with Drucker (2002), who suggests it is better to get people to state their opinions first, as we all have a tendency to twist and edit facts to suit our own prejudices and values.)

Does this mean that you should bombard your reader with nothing but facts? In a literature review of a particular field or topic, perhaps – but if you are writing any other type of essay, definitely not. Facts are a means to an end, not an end in themselves, and that end, for the essay writer, is the presentation of an argument. Your audience is looking for evidence of:

- solid research in the area
- insights, including into current controversies of the area
- originality of thought.



Too many facts and not enough opinions can be as bad as too few facts and too many opinions. Striking a balance between information and persuasion means striking a balance between fact and opinion.

## Critical analysis

Your essay or paper will be an example of argumentation – the presentation of a mix of fact and opinion. Argumentation is an underlying factor in most of the ways we communicate – in writing, in speech, via the media, and even in non-verbal communication.

In constructing your argument, you need to be aware of and use the tools of argumentation, such as:

- the power of paradigms, or dominant worldviews or belief systems; and the nature of paradigm shifts, or the processes of challenging those dominant world views or belief systems
- logical argumentation categories (premises and conclusions, syllogisms, and inductive versus deductive logic; distinctions of kind versus distinctions of degree, necessary versus sufficient conditions, and explanations versus excuses)
- avoidance of logical fallacies (begging the question, false dilemma, slippery slope, straw man and so on)
- lateral versus vertical thinking
- persuasive approaches (message senders, rhetorical mix, features–benefits mix, demonstration of proofs, persuasive language, foot-in-the-door versus door-in-the-face approaches, central versus peripheral processing, persuasion-propaganda sequences, motivational drives, conformity, cognitive dissonance and message responses)
- principles of influence (liking, reciprocity, consistency, social validation and so on) and tactics of influence (assertiveness, ingratiation, impression management, negative and positive politeness and so on).

All of these factors are considered in detail in chapter 12 ‘Argument: logic, persuasion and influence’.

## Bias and balance 1

In presenting an argument in an essay, you need to demonstrate that you are willing to explore and consider all sources of fact and opinion, even those with which you may eventually disagree. This means, firstly, that you make yourself aware of a broad range of sources and are ready to cite them. Beyond this minimum requirement, you should be ready to take issue with other writers in the topic area – who almost certainly will be much more experienced and have greater authority on the subject than you – and give reasons for your contrary opinions. This can be daunting for the beginning writer, but it goes to the heart of the critical method that you need to master.

A vital part of that critical method is the ability to be balanced in your approach – that is, to avoid **bias**. Bias, or lack of balance, can be conveyed by:

- ignoring major or minor sources of contrary data and opinion
- acknowledging such sources, but then simply ignoring them
- selectively or deceptively quoting from such sources
- giving disproportionate weight to sources that support your point of view.

Bias is ethically wrong, but it is also practically unwise: you will almost certainly be found out. Far better to take on the sources you disagree with, and attempt to rebut them honestly, or at least to cast doubt on some of their arguments. Threatening though the thought can be, you may be wrong and your opponents may be right. There is nothing to be gained from submitting a superbly presented and footnoted rationale for the Earth being flat when you can look out of the window and see that the horizon is curved.

**Bias:** a tendency in argument to ignore opposing opinion by using sources selectively or deceptively and/or by giving disproportionate weight to sources that support only one point of view

Always be on the lookout for bias in others' writing too, for we all have blind spots. Conscious bias demonstrates intellectual dishonesty; unconscious bias, where we are not even aware of our selective manipulation of the topic, merely shows that we are not very bright.

## Synthesis and originality

Let's go back and consider the vexed question of originality. There may be dozens, hundreds or even thousands of scholars and non-scholarly writers who have contributed to the field that you are interested in, so how can you possibly demonstrate originality in your work?

There are different kinds of originality. If you are undertaking your own research, then originality will be easily achievable. In well-examined topic areas, it is still possible to be original. You can do this by:

- reinterpreting the work of others in light of other more recent (or older) sources
- synthesising the arguments of various sources – showing linkages, similarities, patterns and synergies that may not yet have been detected.

This may sound intimidating, but it doesn't have to be. If you do the necessary research and reading in the topic area – taking notes, checking internet sources, and doing everything else you should do as a researcher – you may experience a sequence of responses to your reading and note taking that goes something like this:

1. *Amazement and exhaustion.* Wow, what a lot of ideas.
2. *Despair and paralysis.* I don't think there is anything else that could possibly be said about this area.
3. *Endurance.* Time passes; your brain stews on what you have read; you sleep on it; you discuss things with colleagues and friends, which provides further stimulus ...
4. **Creative doubt.** But now I think about it, authority A didn't have much say about topic X, and authority B seemed to have ignored phenomenon Z ...
5. *More creative doubt.* And authorities C, D and E seem to have come up with similar conclusions about topic Y, but no-one yet seems to have pointed out the interconnections between their projects.
6. *A lot of creative doubt.* Writers in this field have done wonderful work in detecting patterns, but I happen to be familiar with another, related (or apparently unrelated) field, and I can see the following similarities and differences ...

There are no guarantees that this process will work, but input often leads to output, and occasionally virtue and hard work are rewarded. Do the research and you might be pleasantly surprised by what your brain delivers.

## Bias and balance 2: the other side

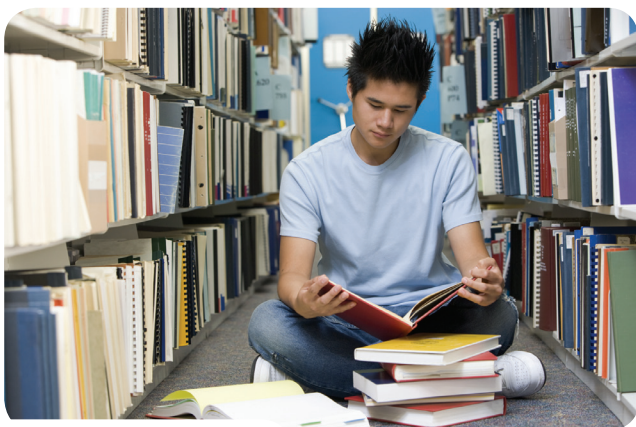
Every student needs to come to terms with the politics of assessment: should I be a sycophant and simply play back to my lecturer/tutor what I think he/she wants to hear, or should I strike out on my own and express my own views, irrespective of the consequences? It makes no sense to offer up a barrage of unsubstantiated prejudice to an audience with diametrically opposed prejudices, pet theories and preoccupations, but be careful about self-editing so much that there is nothing left of you in what you offer. Students need to learn not only about the content of their subjects, but also about the 'rules of the game' of essay writing and the 'codes' in which such essays are written – without losing their own voice in the process (see, for example, Francis & Robson 2001).

It is only a slight exaggeration to suggest that the rule 'Know what you are talking about, and then say what you like' is one you should adhere to. Be prepared to take up any issues of bias or unfair treatment with your audience of one, and if that doesn't work, then you need to proactively broaden that audience. It is ultimately a question of being assertive, demonstrating professional competence and reading the politics of a situation astutely. Demonstrating professional competence is of particular importance.

**Creative doubt:** process in which study and synthesis of research may help a writer detect shortcomings in the literature and thus come up with original perspectives

## Sources and proofs

In his 1625 essay, Francis Bacon supported his opinions on revenge with biblical and historical references. It's possible to create an excellent essay today by using similar references, but generally you will need to cast a broader net if you want to get better than ordinary marks for your efforts. You need to research your topic thoroughly, and that means finding high-quality resources. You may help your cause by being able to cite or quote those sources in support of your assertions.



Using a wide range of credible and relevant source materials to support your opinions provides a solid foundation for a well-written essay.

When we use sources, we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. At the very least, finding out what others think saves us the trouble of reinventing the wheel (doing unnecessary work) on a particular topic. Remember, however, that sources are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Describe earlier work by all means, but then develop your own analysis and argument. It may be appropriate that you tell us that X thinks this, Y thinks that and Z thinks the other thing, but the real question is: What do you think? You use sources as a platform for your opinions, not as a substitute for them.

The correct use of sources is a complex matter, but a number of points need to be noted here in the context of essay writing. Your sources should be:

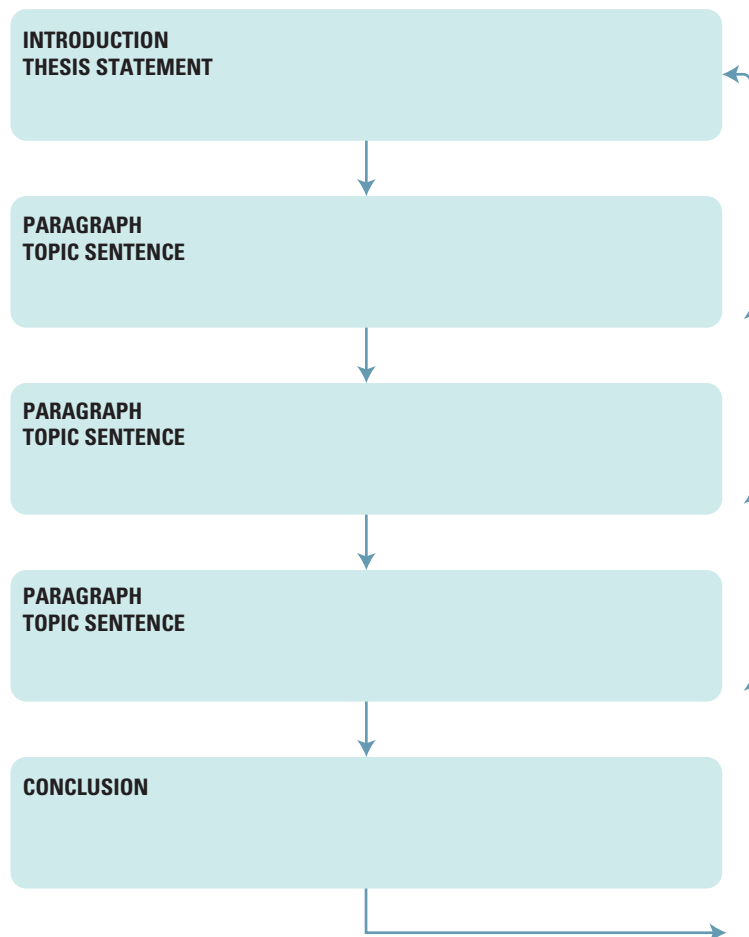
1. *Credible and authoritative.* Use sources from mainstream publishers, and choose articles from professional, refereed journals rather than general, unrefereed journals or magazines. Be wary about using material from internet sources, as much of it is ephemeral and biased. Online journal articles that are available via credible databases are an exception to this rule. Of course, if your purpose is to attack orthodox views, use any sources you like, but ensure that the material is solid and verifiable.
2. *Locatable.* Your audience needs to be able to track down and check your sources. This means observing professional referencing standards, such as providing author name, title of book or journal, year of publication, publisher and place of publication in the case of a book, volume and issue number in the case of a journal, and page numbers if appropriate. Electronic citations need full location details (i.e. URL) and if possible the date you accessed or viewed the source.
3. *Up to date.* Using the most recent references available shows you are aware of the latest developments in your area, which is one of the criteria of professional performance in academic writing. Keep abreast of the latest issues of journals and recently published books. Online databases make the task much easier than it used to be. There is an information explosion going on today, and if you can demonstrate that you are harnessing the energy of that explosion, then you will receive recognition for this. Of course, sometimes it pays to cite older, original sources to show you are familiar with the foundations of a field.
4. *Relevant.* There is no point in showing off your research skills in citing references if they are the wrong references. Merely because a source is new and/or prestigious does not mean it is appropriate to cite it in your work. Irrelevant citation will be marked down.
5. *Convincing.* Even when a reference is relevant, there is no guarantee that it will be convincing in the context of your essay – that is, that it will be the proof you need to support the point you are making. If it is not completely convincing on its own, might it be more persuasive in concert with material from other sources? As a professional, you need to make these hard judgements, and to decide when the material is simply not good enough. If you find yourself believing, 'I've got to use this quote – it's the only

one I've got', then the bad news is you probably haven't done enough research in the first place. It is always better to have too much material from which to pick and choose carefully than not enough, which might compel you to use rubbish when you run out of high-quality data.

6. *In proportion*. It is useful to bring in the voices of others to back you up, but we also need to hear your voice. Don't load your essay so heavily with quoted material that there is little room for your own views. It is difficult to come up with hard and fast rules about this, but if quoted material comprises more than 20 per cent of your total word count, think very carefully about the quality and quantity of what you want to cite, and what you should be citing.
7. *Ethically rigorous*. Don't plagiarise. Plagiarism is theft, and when (not if) discovered, it will bring nasty punishments.
8. *Matched to the context*. Quotations should be worked seamlessly into the flow of your argument, rather than simply plugged in to build up your word count. When introducing a quoted passage, be careful to match your lead-in text grammatically to the opening words of the quote.

## Essay structure

Your essay needs to be structured in a particular way to maximise its effectiveness. A typical structure is shown in figure 7.1.



**FIGURE 7.1** Structure of your essay

Structuring an essay requires planning so that you develop major and minor ideas and themes logically. Becoming more effective at writing means:

- analysing your audience or reader
- considering time management and priority settings
- considering strategies for breaking writer's blocks
- using structuring approaches to generate content and aid exposition (indirect versus direct approach, the 5W-H approach, question and answer techniques, diagramming or mind-mapping, and outlining using software tools)
- editing and proofreading.

All of these issues are considered in greater depth in online chapter 'Writing skills 5: how to write'.

The main components of an essay are:

1. Introduction
2. Body or argument
3. Conclusion.

In the introduction, you need to set down the topic question you will endeavour to answer. Here you set the scene, paying attention to the scope of what you are attempting – that is, you will define what you intend to talk about.

## Thesis statements, summaries and drafting

**Thesis statement:** sentence or sentences, usually positioned at the beginning of an essay, that sum up the writer's argument and purpose in the discussion to follow

It is often useful to establish a **thesis statement** at the outset. The thesis statement is a succinct expression of how you will respond to the topic question. In it you inform your reader of the scope of your argument and the approach you will take. This declaration may be recapitulated in your conclusion, so that there is a clear, cohesive connection between your introductory statement of purpose and the conclusions you reach as a result of your arguments. The thesis statement, in effect, summarises the extended argument. If you are required to write a formal summary or abstract, your thesis statement will contain the gist of this summary or abstract.

Thesis statements, introductions and summaries or abstracts are often hard to write, but they are important in helping to clarify your purpose in writing the essay, which is not always easy to identify. For the following reasons, you may find it useful to write these sections *after* you have written the body of the essay:

1. You may arrive at your true opinion only once you have undertaken an exposition of the major salient points.
2. You may have unresolved conflicts about the issues in the essay, and may end up changing your mind as you write (a painful experience, involving more work, but not nearly as painful as handing in an assignment you don't really believe in, and being marked accordingly).
3. The scope of your argument may change as you expand on some ideas and reduce coverage on, or eliminate, others.

It is useful at the start to clarify the definitions of terms you will be working with. If you find yourself using a number of specialised terms, it may be helpful to collate a glossary of terms, which can be attached at the end of the essay.

Now you can begin to draft the main body of the essay. Each paragraph should cover one particular topic or subtopic. A paragraph can be one or a number of sentences long. Aim for a range of between 50 and 150 words. Keeping paragraphs relatively short helps your reader to more easily process your ideas, and to follow the linkages between your ideas.

It's hard work trying to separate out the ideas in such an undifferentiated lump of text. Great writing is sometimes defined as 'deathless prose', but *your* deathless prose may not be so deathless if your reader has to work too hard to extract your ideas, so give some thought to layout and document design.



## Topic sentences

**Topic sentence:** usually the first sentence in a paragraph; introduces the main idea of the paragraph

You should also give serious thought to beginning each paragraph with a topic sentence. A **topic sentence** introduces the reader to the main idea of the paragraph. It usually takes the form of a statement, but it can also be a question (see figure 7.2).

There are five main factors to bear in mind in the management of intensive care patients, but they are not always listed in order of importance.

How ironic that, as the world was moving towards unanimity on the Kyoto Protocol, the global financial crisis should make many nations back off from commitments to lower carbon output when they perceived it would cost too much to meet the targets.

It is a mistake to think that Keynes was not aware of the monetarist theories being developed by the Chicago School in the 1930s.

The consensus method of group decision making has shortcomings, and I believe that these outweigh its apparent strengths.

At first glance, Drucker does not appear to give the marketing function much importance in the survival plans of the firm, but appearances can be deceptive.

**FIGURE 7.2** Topic sentences: some samples

Topic sentences should flag what is coming, but like leads in news stories written by journalists, they should not only inform. Rather, they should also intrigue, making readers want to learn more. Some software summarising programs or functions (e.g. Autosummarize and Document Map in Microsoft Word) can skim the first sentence of each of your paragraphs and mechanically produce a meaningful summary of the entire document. It is possible, and sometimes desirable, to delay the topic sentence – for example, for dramatic effect – but don't push your reader's patience too far.

Writing topic sentences can help in the planning of your essay. Whether in full or summarised in note form, a list of your topic sentences can help you create a meaningful structure.

Make sure that your paragraphs are not simply unrelated blocks of text floating in a sea of white space. Link them logically and dynamically using words and phrases that define relationships, such as:

- In spite of this, ...
- Yet again, however, ...
- Secondly, ...
- Meanwhile, in another part of the battlefield, ...
- In contrast to this, ...
- The exception to this rule is ...

Such linkages help draw together your ideas in a coherent whole, and should not be regarded as trivial (for more on the expository tools of paragraphing and transitional statements, as well as those of grammatical parallelism and rhetorical patterning, see online chapter 'Writing skills 3: style').

Your conclusion should sum up your argument, drawing all the threads together. In a real sense, the conclusion is the most important part of your essay, because it is the forum in which your authentic voice is heard. No new information is introduced at this stage; it's just you, summing up your arguments, recapitulating, giving your final response to the thesis statement, and spelling out the implications of this. You should not repeat the wording from the introduction, but there should be a symmetry between your introduction and conclusion. The three-part structure of your essay, therefore, should follow the form of a good spoken presentation:

1. Tell them what you're going to tell them.
2. Tell them.
3. Tell them what you've just told them.

# Keeping on track

Don't lose sight of the focus of the essay. Remember, you have one purpose and one alone: to answer the question that has been set. Will the next sentence you write help to answer the question, or not? Apply this test to every sentence.

Don't wander from the main point, even if the material you have seems particularly interesting. If you have a lot of good ideas and good quoted material, maybe some of it is not for this essay, but for another one; don't waste it – store it in a notebook or a file and use it another time. If you feel you have to use it because you don't have anything else to say, then you are just going through the motions, and don't be too surprised or disappointed if you receive a low mark. It is your problem, not the assessor's, that you don't have enough material. Do something about it.

**Waffle:** to pad out a piece of writing with meaningless or redundant words

Don't **waffle** or pad out your writing. The only person you will be fooling by this approach is yourself.

At the other extreme, don't leave out what should be included. If you feel you run the risk of patronising your reader by stating the obvious, play it safe by putting linking and contextual material in footnotes or appendices.

## Style and technique

Make sure your style is clear and easy to read. This does not mean that it should be mechanical and sterile, and devoid of personality; it does mean that the message should be at the forefront, with the medium (or the way in which you communicate the message) being secondary. If you know your stuff, then you should be able to put your ideas together in such a form that reading the essay will be a pleasant experience for your reader, and that won't do you any harm at all.

Style matters. Some professors may even prefer essays that are well-structured and well-written but not particularly brilliant, to those that contain a truly original insight cloaked in language that would make Webster and Fowler turn in their graves. Writing a sonnet or a short one-act play is not usually a good idea, but a student should be encouraged to bring all his [her] skills as a writer to bear on the essay topic. After all, that is why the question is an essay question, rather than a true/false or short-answer. (King 1998, p. 63)

When quoting other sources, make sure you use the citing conventions appropriate to the subject or area in which you are writing. Use quoted material professionally: don't, for example, quote only part of a source to create a false impression of what that source is really saying. Whatever you do, don't plagiarise, or try to pass off someone else's work as your own (see chapter 3).

## Time and technique

Writing is not really writing unless it involves some measure of rewriting. Drafting, redrafting and editing are all part of the grinding and stewing process that underlies the clear expression of your thoughts. Getting it right the first time is a good principle to follow in many areas of life, such as time management, but it is not an effective approach to producing a good piece of writing.

Having said that, it is also true that the most effective tool you have as a writer is time itself: time to stew on things, time to reconsider, time to rip it all apart and put it back together again in a better form, time to reluctantly edit out that superb phrase or witticism that doesn't quite fit, time for that flash of insight that reveals to you that you don't really believe in what you have just written, time to work through a second or third draft – it all

takes time. The only way you can ensure you have that time is to plan, to avoid procrastination and to know your own weaknesses and strengths.

## Say what you mean, and mean what you say

The more research and thought you put into a topic, the more confident you should be about expressing a view on the topic. Be direct, but avoid being dogmatic. Sweeping generalisations that are only weakly supported by your evidence (or perhaps not supported at all) do your cause no good at all. Let your arguments speak for themselves as you build and interconnect assertions and proofs, creating a momentum for your thesis or ideas.

Note that academic writers use certain linguistic strategies to hedge or to boost their ideas:

Academic texts are most frequently characterised by a desire to avoid making claims and statements that are too direct and assertive, since academic discourse is often about theories, conclusions drawn from evidence, exchanging viewpoints, and so on, rather than hard, indisputable facts. Therefore hedging (making a proposition less assertive) is very important in academic styles. Less often, it is sometimes also necessary to assert a claim or viewpoint quite directly and more confidently, a process we shall refer to as boosting. (Carter & McCarthy 2006, p. 279)

Examples of **hedging** and **boosting** linguistic strategies are shown in figure 7.3 (for definitions of grammatical terms such as adverbs and prepositional phrases, see online chapter ‘Writing skills 1: grammar’).

**Hedging:** qualification of statements or claims

**Boosting:** assertion of statements or claims

Hedging strategies	Boosting strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Modal/auxiliary verbs (can, could, might, may, would)</li> <li>■ Adverbs (arguably, generally, typically, probably)</li> <li>■ Prepositional phrases (in a sense, in most cases, in principle)</li> <li>■ Impersonal constructions (it is suggested, it is generally agreed)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Adverbs (clearly, inevitably, plainly, undoubtedly)</li> <li>■ Other expressions (for certain, it was clear that)</li> </ul>

**FIGURE 7.3** Hedging and boosting writing strategies

Source: Adapted from Carter and McCarthy (2006, pp. 282–4).

Hedging can go too far, of course: you can set off a statement with so many qualifications that your original proposition is negated, and it becomes a mystery as to why you would have wanted to make such an assertion in the first place (see online chapter 6 ‘Scientific and technical writing’).

Similarly, an over-use of boosting phrases may create the suspicion that you are trying to bluster or deceive your way around a weak argument. By all means, use ‘clearly’ and ‘obviously’, but in moderation: let your reader be the judge of what is clear and obvious. Use your common sense: be prudent but forthright in saying what you mean, and meaning what you say.

Rather than simply making sweeping and unsupported assertions, and trying to bluff your reader, it is better to make clear statements and then qualify those statements with a judicious use of hedging or riders (figure 7.4).

You can also use boosting strategies or locutions (figure 7.5), but in the academic arena, the reality is that you will end up hedging more than boosting.

These factors, taken together, **might seem** to present a strong case for much, if not all, gender-specific behaviour being socially conditioned, but it may be wise to consider the critique of the environmentalist position presented by sociobiological writers such as Stewart-Williams (2010) and Hardy (2011).

Beyond a certain point, however, we are **probably** in the realms of speculation; even though we may theorise on what Alexander's motivations were at this point in the move eastward, the reality is that we just do not know. The data does not exist, and all we have are the anecdotes of two historians of problematic reliability and integrity.

**In principle**, class action suits have much to recommend them, as much for reasons of social equity as for securing natural justice, but a number of caveats need to be borne in mind, especially by those in legal practice with large pro bono commitments and other activities that may have a negative impact on cash flow.

Therefore, it **would appear** to make sense for hospitality industry companies to walk away from exchange rate-related losses and shift preferred payment modes to credit card and electronic fund transfer. This policy change can be communicated through letters, brochures, advertising and web presence, but the most effective channel may be for counter staff to impart this directly to guests. It **might be** wise to retain minimal systems for cash in major currencies, however, as catastrophic system breakdown in computer systems cannot be ruled out permanently.

Consumer demand for plain and sateen weaves could well increase because of their well-publicised appearance in the recent Paris prêt-à-porter collections, but it is **generally agreed** that twill weaves may still have a place for the next few years, higher manufacturing costs notwithstanding, because the superior drape and wrinkle-free properties of twill may give designers more freedom and customers more satisfaction than those of plains and sateens.

**FIGURE 7.4** Stating and hedging: sample wording

I believe, therefore, that there is overwhelming evidence for the case presented by the researchers. The parallels they draw are **clearly** compelling.

The four trial balance spreadsheet programs and templates available to firms therefore all have much to offer, and the market leader has certain features that **without doubt** justify its place in the market.

**FIGURE 7.5** Stating and boosting: sample wording

## You, the author

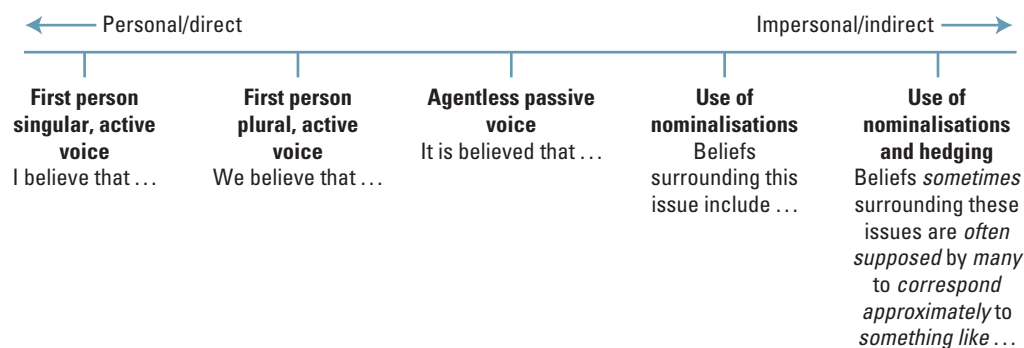
Hedging and boosting, but particularly hedging, are part of academic style, and that style often presents problems for writers trying to learn how to master style in post-secondary or post-school learning situations. While writers may have been encouraged to use personal styles of expression in school writing situations, they may find that there is a different culture of expectations in tertiary educational environments. This is the problem or matter of appropriate **authorial voice**.

Academic writing, together with much scientific writing (see online chapter 6 'Scientific and technical writing'), often seems to be impersonal and abstract, making heavy use of passive voice – 'It is believed ...' rather than 'I believe ...'.

Writing styles can be characterised as being on a continuum ranging from personal/direct style to impersonal/indirect style (see figure 7.6). The most personal and direct type of discourse involves the author – a person you are reading, or you, depending upon the role you play – using the first person singular pronoun and the active voice. Moving away from this point, authors may use the plural first person. This is literally true when there is more than one author, but sometimes sole authors will use it to refer to a broader

**Authorial voice:** the style most favoured in a discipline, area or publication, usually involving use or non-use of first-person pronouns and use or non-use of passive voice, nominalisations and hedging

community (see the footnote) or – in some circumstances – when they are not as confident as they might be, and invoke the authority of a plural.<sup>1</sup> Further along the continuum is the use of the agentless passive. This is often favoured in scientific writing, so that instead of saying ‘I/we conducted experiments ...’ the tendency is to say ‘Experiments were conducted ...’ Even further along the continuum comes the use of nominalisations (see online chapter ‘Writing skills 4: plain English’), where simple verb constructions are replaced by noun/verb constructions. Finally, the most impersonal and indirect style may involve hedging, as well as nominalisations, in order to moderate the claims being made (the example given here is deliberately exaggerated).



**FIGURE 7.6** Personal/direct style versus impersonal/indirect style — a continuum

Even within the use of first person pronouns, however, there may be subtle variations. Tang and John (1999) suggest that there is a continuum of shades of usage for ‘I’ and ‘we/us’ (shown in figure 7.7) (see also Harwood 2005; Kuo 1999; Freddi 2005; Hyland 2002). These usages are:

- No ‘I’ (impersonal style)
- ‘I’ as representative (‘In this sphere, we have words like ...’ or ‘We know that all dialects ...’)
- ‘I’ as guide (‘In example one, we see ...’ or ‘So far, we have said nothing about ...’)
- ‘I’ as architect (‘I will concentrate on ...’ or ‘In my essay, I shall ...’)
- ‘I’ as a recounter of research process (‘I recorded a conversation with ...’ or ‘All of the papers I read were ...’)
- ‘I’ as opinion holder (‘I would like to show that ...’ or ‘I agree with Fairclough [1992b] that ...’)
- ‘I’ as originator (‘Hence, I will examine the factors ...’ or ‘To me, the phrase embodies the whole process ...’). (Adapted from Tang and John, 1999)

So when should you use ‘I’? This is not always clear. The traditional academic/scientific culture that shied away from personal pronouns and heavily favoured passive voice is changing, and there is a move towards a more personal and active style in a number of disciplines and publications. However, there is no uniform pattern here, and you may find that a style that is acceptable in one subject (or even for one lecturer in one subject) is not acceptable in another. You need to seek out clear guidelines on this. You have the right

1. In rhetoric, a distinction is sometimes drawn between *plural majestatis*, or ‘royal we’, sometimes used by royalty and popes (an individual saying ‘we decree that ...’) and *plural modestiae* or *plural auctoris*, or authority/s or author’s plural, which includes readers and listeners.

The *plural majestatis* tends to get short shrift in modern democratic societies: Mark Twain once observed that ‘Only kings, editors and people with tapeworm have the right to use the editorial “we”’, while US Navy Admiral Hyman Rickover told a subordinate who used ‘we’ that ‘Three groups of people are permitted that usage: pregnant women, royalty and schizophrenics. Which one are you?’.





One of the major criticisms made by employers of graduates they have hired is that too much of the graduates' writing is 'essay-like'. Essays or papers are what get you good (or bad) marks when you are in your role as a student, but workplace documents such as reports and emails are what attract favourable (or unfavourable) attention when you are in your role as an employee. Be versatile: match your style to your audience.

## Layout factors

Traditionally, essays were written without headings or graphics such as figures and tables. Now the genre of the essay is discernibly taking on features traditionally associated with documents such as reports. Nevertheless, in some areas and disciplines, essay markers are uncomfortable with such features. So before you begin, seek guidance on the format expected and keep that guidance in mind as you develop your work.

### ASSESS YOURSELF

1. Photocopy pages from journal articles or from books dealing with your area of enquiry. Using highlighter pens, mark up the topic sentence in each paragraph. Now, respond to the following questions.
  - (a) What function do these sentences play in the paragraphs?
  - (b) Are topic sentences hard to find or non-existent?
  - (c) Do these sentences help or hinder comprehension of the writer's argument?
2. Cut and paste into a word-processing file some pages from journal articles or books dealing with your area of enquiry. Now, use software-summarising tools to summarise or analyse the structure of the argument of your selection. What does it reveal to you about the topic sentence structure of the samples?
3. Look at textbooks and journal articles from 20 to 30 years ago and at those of today. Are there any differences in authorial voice or style?

Before we go any further, let's take stock of what we have learnt so far. We have looked at the criteria of good and bad essay writing. Looking at Bacon's essay, we have learnt the importance of:

- having a point of view
- making valid assertions
- giving solid proof and examples
- following a sound expositional technique
- using a cumulative approach to build the plausibility of what you want to persuade us of.

These goals remain the same after almost 400 years.

We saw that the most discouraging thing for essay writers – 'How can I say something original, when it's all been said before?' – can be partially overcome by processes such as creative doubt. We have also looked at structuring topic sentences, thesis statements, transitions, hedging and boosting, and authorial voice.

With concepts like these under our belt, let's now see them put to work (or ignored) by looking at two condensed sample essays that are both on the same topic.

## Putting it together: sample essays

The samples shown on the next pages are not complete essays, but they may help us to understand what works and what does not work in the construction of an essay. The 'good' example is not perfect, but it presents a useful model to learn from.

## Essay one: a bad example

PUBLIC POLICY 206

WHAT ARE THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE GREENHOUSE EFFECT?

Martin Plaistowe

ID No. 43211789

Tutorial Group: Wednesday 2–3 pm

Lecturer: Dr Rolf Birtles

The so-called<sup>1</sup> ‘greenhouse effect’ is nothing but a crock of hype.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Studies done by the Competitive Enterprise Institute show clearly that claims of global warming are false:

<sup>4</sup>There are three reasons why this claim is not valid, according to Dr Baliunas. First, most of the warming in the last 100 years occurred before the build-up of greenhouse gases. Second, the surface temperature record suffers from many confounding factors. The most important being the urban heat island effect, where growing cities surrounding thermometer stations bias the temperature record upwards.<sup>5 6</sup> Finally, the surface record suffers from inadequate global coverage. ‘Good records’, according to Dr Baliunas, ‘with near-continual coverage of the last 100 years, cover only 18 percent of the surface.’

*Computer models, which have been used to bolster the case for global warming, are also deficient, said Dr Baliunas.*

*The assumption that water vapor will increase with a rise in man-made greenhouse gases, accounting for most of the predicted warming, has been ‘challenged by developments in convection theory and new measurements.’*

(<http://www.cei.org/utills/printer.cfm?AID=1220>)<sup>7 8 9</sup>

Many academics tend, predictably enough, to push a straight environmentalist or green line on ‘global warming’ (Botkin & Keller 2005; McElroy 2002; Stern, 2007; Oreskes & Conway, 2011), refusing to acknowledge that there are many reputable scientists who think that the whole thing is a lot of hot air.<sup>10</sup> In fact the very use of the term ‘greenhouse’ is wrong, as Harvey points out:

The term ‘greenhouse effect’ is used to refer to the tendency of the atmosphere to create a warmer climate than would otherwise be the case. However the physical mechanisms by which the presence of the atmosphere warms the climate and the primary mechanism that causes a greenhouse to be warm are in fact quite different. A greenhouse heats up by day as the air within the greenhouse is heated by the sun. Outside the greenhouse, near-surface air that is heated through absorption of solar radiation by the ground surface is free to rise and be replaced with colder air from above. This cannot happen in a greenhouse, where the heated air is physically prevented from rising and being replaced with colder air. The so-called greenhouse effect does not prevent the physical movement of air parcels. (Harvey 2000)<sup>11 12</sup>

1. Sarcasm may be inappropriate.

2. Avoid use of slang.

3. No introduction to issues to be explored in essay

4. No lead-in to quote or explanation of who the expert is

5. Plagiarism: merely a cut-and-paste from website source

6. Grammatical error; sentence fragment (uncorrected)

7. Website text is ephemeral — a media release from 1998. The URL has since changed, as often happens on the net. It would have been better to seek out a more substantial and up-to-date reference from the same source, e.g. Bailey (2008).

8. Cited text is inconsistently laid out: indenting and fonts.

9. Invalid citation method for web document — try, wherever possible, to tie down to author surname: here, Georgia (1998).

10. But what, specifically, do they say? This is abuse, not argument.

11. Selective quotation; the source then goes on to say that there is, in fact, a similarity, and the entire reference accepts the notion of global warming.

12. Semantic quibbling; the essay writer is trying to show that, because an analogy is not perfect, the phenomenon being analysed cannot be real. This remains unproven.

(continued)

(continued)

1. Suggested, not proven

2. Sources cited tend to be sensationalist.

3. Second reference needs to be linked with first into broader point about cooling; full details should not be cited in text, but in reference list.

4. Author's name misspelled

5. Topic change: new paragraph required

6. Author suggests only that it might be possible.

7. Non sequitur; is the essay writer denying or affirming warming? The cited author also expresses concern about warming.

8. Padding, waffle

9. Quoted author is talking about the Kyoto Protocol — introductory wording setting this connection up is needed.

10. Lead-in text and quoted text not grammatically matched

Scientists have proven that 'Global warming' does not, in fact, exist (Milloy, 2009; Horner, 2009). Rather, global cooling is what we should be concerned about. Taylor (1999) has studied climate change and has proven<sup>1</sup> that another ice age is about to begin (Landscheidt, Theodor (2003) 'New Little Ice Age Instead of Global Warming?' *Energy and Environment*, Vol. 14, No. 2-3, pp 327–350).<sup>2 3</sup>

Buydko<sup>4</sup> (1996) also points out that increased global warming would in fact be beneficial as increased levels of carbon dioxide would boost photosynthetic processes and increase agricultural productivity, thus ensuring that starving billions would not have to starve.<sup>5 6</sup> The economic costs of succumbing to greenhouse hype are considerable, and may well be crippling, when all economic, fiscal, monetary, macro-economic, industrial, institutional and other factors are factored into any type of reasonable decision making and problem-solving process, or processes.<sup>7</sup> Any rational and ethical decision maker would need to weigh up, consider, ponder, contemplate and factor in every possible scenario of cost-benefit analysis to eventually arrive at reasonable policy outcomes that would be acceptable to the democratic majority that needs must provide (or withhold) the mandate needed in any democratic decision-making process. It is imperative that such a process not be held hostage by wild-eyed radicals with a hidden agenda,<sup>8</sup> as experts like Stott point out:

Even if all 180 countries ratified the protocol and then actually met their greenhouse gas emission targets — a highly unlikely political scenario — we still might only affect temperature by between 0.07 and 0.2° Celsius, and even this could be thrown out by a couple of erupting volcanoes or altering landscape albedos. And what are the economics of this meaningless self-sacrifice demanded by Kyoto? According to recent models, implementing Kyoto will cost anywhere between \$100b and \$1000b, with a mean around \$350b. Now that amount of money could pay off the public debt of the 49 poorest countries of the world and provide clean drinking water for all! Need one say more? (Stott 2001)<sup>9</sup>

The greenhouse effect is comprised of a number of synergistically linked processes such as radiative forcing, which is<sup>10</sup>

... due to the increases of the well-mixed greenhouse gases from 1750 to 2000 is estimated to be 2.43 Wm<sup>-2</sup>. 1.46 Wm<sup>-2</sup> from CO<sub>2</sub>; 0.48 Wm<sup>-2</sup> from CH<sub>4</sub>; 0.34 Wm<sup>-2</sup> from the halocarbons; and 0.15 Wm<sup>-2</sup> from N<sub>2</sub>O.<sup>11</sup>

The hype surrounding the greenhouse effect cannot simply be shrugged off. If the widespread changes<sup>12</sup> advocated by greenhouse zealots were to be implemented, then the financial costs would be crippling. No responsible administrator or politician could rationally contemplate factoring in such pseudo-science when the real work of decision making needs to be undertaken in a democratic society, or for that matter, in an undemocratic society.<sup>13</sup> Just as surely as the so-called ozone layer crisis was proven to be another fantasy, so too will the greenhouse effect, so-called.<sup>14</sup>

The credibility of the whole idea has, anyway, been dispelled by Climategate and the destruction of the hockey stick graph of change.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Houghton, J.T. et al (Eds) (2001) *Climate Change 2001: The Scientific Basis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 7<sup>16</sup>

11. This is meant to be a general definition, but it contains extremely, even overly, specific and technically complex information, using undefined terms.

12. What are these proposed changes? Surely they would be a critical aspect of an essay on policy implications?

13. Repetition, padding

14. Unproven assertion

15. Both factors could strengthen the argument, but they are not explained or cited correctly (e.g. Montford 2010).

16. Reference details in footnote: citation system different from that of main style used

1. Several factual errors

2. Bizarre conclusion, shifting ground, and introducing new information

US President Obama walked away from a deal at the Kyoto conference, and we know why he did: the global financial crisis of 1995 meant that luxuries like carbon taxes would make industries uneconomic, and thus economics proved more important than spurious environmental ideas.<sup>1</sup>

The choice is then clear for all responsible decision makers, and that is to respond to global warming by implementing a range of low-impact technologies, from hydrogen-powered cars to nuclear power plants.<sup>2</sup>

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3. URL address is out of date; access date is also very dated.

4. Reference list incomplete; uncited references given; not in alphabetical order; inconsistent reference style used.



1. Thesis statement

2. Exposition of ideas uses standard style of sequential narrative sentences; layout features of genres such as reports — such as bullet points — avoided.

3. Impersonal academic style used — impersonal/agentless passive voice a feature; no pronouns in authorial voice

4. Definitions

5. Lead-in text grammatically matches quoted material.

6. Topic sentences begin paragraphs.

7. Square brackets show essay writer is interpolating explanatory text not present in actual quoted passage.

8. Essay moves from setting up of basic concepts to policy implications — answering the question posed by lecturer setting topic.

9. Summary of background from fairly recent sources provides context.

## Essay two: a better example

PUBLIC POLICY 206

### WHAT ARE THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE GREENHOUSE EFFECT?

Martin Plaistowe  
ID No. 43211789  
Tutorial Group: Wednesday 2–3 pm  
Lecturer: Dr Rolf Birtles

The greenhouse effect and the associated concept of global warming present great challenges to policy makers at local, state or provincial, national and international levels.

<sup>1</sup>The fundamental position of this essay will be that the responses of decision makers in public and private sectors to the greenhouse effect phenomenon have been mixed, and this has reflected the flawed consensus that exists within the scientific community. Trends may be emerging, however, which indicate that some actors are behaving as if the effect is real, no matter what. Because their actions may accord them strategic advantages in certain arenas, this may trigger a bandwagon effect, whereby many decision makers ignore underlying uncertainties in order to preserve commercial and national strategic positions.<sup>2 3</sup>

There are, in fact, two greenhouse effects. The first is the ‘natural’ greenhouse effect, whereby radiation from the sun hits the earth, and is retransmitted back to space: part of that energy, however, is absorbed by certain greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, chlorofluorocarbons), which leads to a warming of the atmosphere — just like a glass greenhouse retains some of the sun’s warmth to help stimulate plant growth within the greenhouse. The second effect is the ‘enhanced’ greenhouse effect, due to human activity such as burning fossil fuels and deforestation, which creates greenhouse gases (Houghton, 2009, p. 22).<sup>4</sup>

Many scientists argue that in the past few decades the planet has undergone unprecedented warming, and that this warming appears to have been caused by anthropogenic or human-caused activity. The prestigious Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in its early 2001 report, concluded that:<sup>5 6</sup>

In the light of new evidence and taking into account the remaining uncertainties, most of the observed warming over the last 50 years is likely [i.e., having a 66–90 per cent chance] to have been due to the increase in greenhouse gas concentrations. (Houghton et al. (eds.) 2001, p. 10)<sup>7</sup>

Such global warming could result in regional increases in floods and droughts, inundation of coastal areas, increase in high-temperature events and fires, outbreaks of pests and diseases, and significant damage to ecosystems (Jepma & Munasinghe 1998, pp. 28–34 ; Parks & Ellis 2005, pp. 4–11; Gore 2007, pp. 2–14).<sup>8</sup>

Concerns about global warming led to the international meeting on climate change in Kyoto in 1997, which led to the declaration of the Kyoto Protocol (McElroy 2002, pp. 232–51). The Kyoto Protocol has been signed by many countries, including Australia, and commits them to specific reductions in the production of greenhouse gases. A number of countries, including the United States, have still not signed the Protocol, arguing that committing to reductions would cause unacceptable damage to their economies (Koh 2009, p. 325). On the other hand, some scientists, such as Plimer (2009), argue that the greenhouse effect is a natural phenomenon alternating with ice ages over periods of thousands of years, with anthropogenic causes having little effect.<sup>9</sup>

1. References include recent peer-reviewed journals.

2. Cited references show wide reading, and ability to synthesise materials from different sources.

3. Writer now moves away from 'greenhouse effect' as main concept, using 'global warming' as a term covering both ideas. A good strategy, or not?

4. Balanced treatment of non-mainstream views

5. Use of print and online sources

6. New section raises other possibilities and trends, thus picking up approach foreshadowed in thesis statement.

7. Restatement of part of thesis statement, giving overview of previous point

8. Recapitulation demonstrates that original objectives of the essay have been met.

If it is believed that global warming is real, and if it is believed something should be done about it, then a number of useful policy shifts become apparent. These policies might include the mandating of reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> production of motor vehicles (such as in California — see Warnatzsch & Reay 2011, pp. 23–39<sup>1</sup>), shifting of production of electricity away from coal-fired methods to sustainable or 'green' methods (Tükay & Telli 2011), the setting up markets in energy credits, and allowing trading of these (Christiansen & Wettestad 2003, p. 14; Stern 2007, pp. 324–27<sup>2</sup>), the allocating of permits to emit gases based upon current efficiency data of individual power plants (Vesterdal & Svendsen 2004, p. 963), and the changing of land management practices, leading to less burning off of biomass and sequestration of carbon through creation of carbon sinks such as forests and better management of grasslands, soils and forests (Botkin & Keller 2005, pp. 481–83).<sup>3</sup>

Global warming skeptics see dangers in some or all of these policies (Zyrkowski 2006, pp. 2–16; Singer & Avery 2007, pp. 3–12). Wildavsky, for example, sees global warming as a myth created by environmentalists to engineer radical social changes such as lower growth rates, smaller populations, consuming less and sharing a much lower level of resources much more equally (Wildavsky 1992, p. xv).<sup>4</sup>

Budyko also argues that increased warming may lead to rises in productivity of crops, which will be necessary to feed another five billion people born in the next few decades (although he does also acknowledge potentially damaging effects of this) (Budyko 1996, pp. 113–119) (see also Stott 2001).<sup>4 5</sup>

Some writers have suggested, however, that it does not matter whether global warming exists or not, because if actors such as policy-makers and entrepreneurs act as if it does, then jobs and wealth can be created by developing renewable energy industries. Lovins, for example, states that the major controversy about uncertainties in climate science is immaterial because of this — money can be made from renewables, so why not do it anyway? (Amory Lovins, quoted in Hoffman 2009, p. 330)<sup>6</sup>

Further, Krause, Decanio, Hoerner and Baer (2002, p. 342) argue that there are 'co-benefits' to behaving as if global warming was real, such as cleaner air due to less pollution and healthier people.

Lomborg (2008, 2010, 2011) follows up on this line, arguing that carbon limitation is a lost cause, as international conferences on carbon reduction keep failing. This failure will be exacerbated by the global financial crisis, with there being no 'first mover' advantage in imposing carbon taxes — the opposite, in fact, is true. Lomborg notes that three US think tanks from opposite ends of the political spectrum have come to a consensus that creation of affordable alternative energy sources is the only way — the middle way — between proponents of no carbon and a 'deep green' return to basic lifestyles. Lomborg argues that this can be done for the cost of 0.2 per cent of global gross product, or roughly US\$100 billion a year, to invent alternative energy technologies that everyone can afford.

If numerous political and industrial actors behave in this way, with a consensus to spend for such a program, their actions may accord them strategic advantages in certain arenas, and this may trigger a 'bandwagon effect', whereby many or most decision makers ignore underlying uncertainties in order to preserve commercial and national strategic positions.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, a number of points about global warming are now apparent. Is global warming real? Probably, but it may not matter anyway. Some actors are moving the goalposts by redefining business objectives and government policy to develop alternative industries, to improve public health and to reap conservation benefits.<sup>8</sup>

(continued)

(continued)

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# Essay writing: dos and don'ts

Our two sample essays provide insights into what to do and what not to do when writing essays (note also the criteria listed earlier in table 7.1). Table 7.3 summarises the main principles.

**TABLE 7.3** Essay writing dos and don'ts

Aspect	Do this	Don't do this
Position	Be even-handed, considering all sides of question.	Show bias, looking at only one viewpoint.
Statement of position	Use a thesis statement to introduce the direction you will take.	Jump straight into argument without creating a context for that argument.
Statement of scope	Clarify what issues are to be covered, and what will not be covered.	Avoid statement of scope.
Terminology	Define terms; if technical terms need to be used, explain them in first instance.	Avoid defining terms; switch between normal and technical language without notice.
Exposition of argument	Clearly set out paragraphs; use headings where appropriate; use topic sentences; link ideas to reinforce unfolding argument.	Avoid clear topic changes with paragraphing; use inappropriate or confusing headings; use no or few topic sentences; confuse reader with choppy exposition and development.
Structural integrity	In conclusion, recapitulate issues, showing how the topic question has been answered.	Don't provide a clear recapitulation of ideas in the conclusion; end without reference to topic question; introduce new material at the end.
Research	Use old and new material; show preference for reputable, peer-reviewed material; handle popular and internet sources with care; show evidence of understanding and synthesis of sources.	Use out-of-date material; use only popular material (such as journalism) and internet sources of problematic quality; show no evidence of understanding and synthesis of sources.
Quotation	Cite sources legitimately (i.e. don't quote selectively); lead into quotes with appropriate introductory text, matching grammatical structure of lead-in text with quoted material; if quoting, give page numbers; avoid plagiarism.	Selectively quote sources to give false impressions; insert quotes without (or with inappropriate) introductory text; ignore matching grammatical structure of lead-in text with quoted material; if quoting, don't give page numbers; plagiarise.
Original thought	Try to demonstrate original views.	Simply rehash the views of others, never stating your own.
Professional style	Use appropriate academic language; avoid waffle and padding.	Use slang, sarcasm and waffle to increase word count.

*(continued)*

**TABLE 7.3** (continued)

Aspect	Do this	Don't do this
Referencing	Use appropriate referencing conventions: always cite source by using footnotes, endnotes or Harvard author-date system. Don't presume it is acceptable merely to list them in the bibliography.	Mix up referencing styles; forget to include all source details; list references out of alphabetical order; don't refer to sources by citing: only put them in the bibliography (let the reader work out where they are cited).
Layout	Use simple, clear layout; use fonts consistently; include graphics where appropriate.	Adopt confused, cluttered layout; use fonts inconsistently; omit graphics where they would help clarify; use confusing graphics or include graphics where none required.

## Essay writing: a humorous approach

We have looked at what needs to be done when writing essays, but what about the things that shouldn't be done? King (1998), using a humorous approach, warns students writing in one discipline – political science – of the perils of the Six Evil Geniuses of essay writing. Every essay writer, no matter what the discipline, at times feels the presence of these evil spirits; table 7.4 shows what happens when such spirits take over honest writers. King's Evil Geniuses model of what not to do could be renamed 'games essay writers play (and usually lose)'. The chief antidote to an Evil Genius, King suggests, is intellectual honesty, and that is true no matter what discipline we are writing in. There is only one thing worse than writing like this, and that is being so misguided that you think you can do so and get away with it.

**TABLE 7.4** The Six Evil Geniuses of essay writing

Evil genius	Motivation	Sample essay question	Sample essay response	Analysis
1. The Sycophant	The Sycophant thinks if she butters up the marker (e.g. by praising the lectures or the reading assignments), the marker will be likely to think better of the content of the essay itself.	Why are political scientists concerned with the concept of 'political culture'?	In their brilliant, ground-breaking work, Almond and Verba address the concept of political culture. As Professor Jones demonstrated in her excellent and stimulating lecture, the concept of political culture is important. By using it, as Professor Jones cogently argued, political scientists can explain a number of political phenomena ...	Sycophantism is, of course, a bad idea. Essays like this read more like the minutes of a Soviet Communist Party congress than a response to an exam question. The fact that a lecturer has assigned a particular reading during a course is no guarantee that he/she thinks that the author of the reading is 'right'. Indeed, testing the student's ability to engage critically with assigned readings, instead of merely accepting them as fact because they are written by professional academics, is one of the chief reasons for asking essay questions in the first place.



Evil genius	Motivation	Sample essay question	Sample essay response	Analysis
2. The Rakish Raconteur	The Rakish Raconteur is the first cousin of the Sycophant. The Raconteur feels that writing in a conversational style and using the essay as a way of ‘conversing’ with the lecturer will allow his innate wit and charm to mask his lack of knowledge.	Discuss the contrasting views of ‘modernisation theory’ and ‘dependency theory’. Which one gives a better account of economic development?	Well, as I was thinking the other night, modernisation and dependency are really two sides of the same coin. I mean, after all, who can say who is more modern than someone else? But seriously (is this a trick question?), there are a couple of ways that one differs from the other. Modernisationists think that the world is linear and ordered (they should see my dorm room!) . . .	This student may have a great career selling used cars, but his prospects in any job that requires serious analytical skills are definitely limited. This style is guaranteed to turn off any marker. Essay questions are a tool lecturers use to assess a student’s knowledge and ability to formulate a clear argument. They should not be viewed as a chance to hang out with that lecture dude, know what I’m saying?
3. The Sanitary Engineer	The Sanitary Engineer (known long ago, in a less politically correct age, as a ‘garbage man’) is an expert at mind-dumping. He has crammed a huge amount of facts, terms, typologies and other information into his short-term memory, and nothing — not even the essay question itself — will prevent him from getting it all down on paper.	What did Tocqueville mean when he wrote about the importance of ‘associations’ in American civic life?	Alexis de Tocqueville was a young (26 years old) French traveller and writer who visited America for 9 months in 1831–1832 and wrote a book on his travels, published in two volumes in French in 1835–1840, and in its English translation as <i>Democracy in America</i> . His purpose in coming to the young United States (in which he visited 17 of the 24 states of the time), which had engaged in a revolution with Great Britain over a half century before and had adopted an independent Constitution, was actually to write a report on the American prison system. He travelled with an associate, Gustave Beaumont (see map and sketch of Beaumont on next page) . . .	Of course, it is a good idea to let the marker know you have full command of the facts, but throwing in a congeries of irrelevant factoids (or non-facts) without addressing the question set is never helpful. The Sanitary Engineer has accumulated a great deal of information, and his ability to recall it all is certainly impressive. But while his skills might be useful in a game of Trivial Pursuit, they will not necessarily help him answer the essay question.
4. The Jargon-Meister	The Jargon-Meister attempts to blind the reader with science. Using an array of political science terms — most of which she probably does not understand — she hopes to so impress the marker that he/she will ignore the fact that the essay really says nothing at all.	What do theorists mean when they say that humans are ‘rational actors’?	Rationality is an exogenous component of selective incentives. As such, and in direct contradiction to the concept of endogenising preferences, actors cannot be truly rational unless they have engaged in side-payments to rotating credit organisations.	The Jargon-Meister appears to make an argument, and a forceful one at that. But once one peels away the terminology, it is clear that the thesis really has very little content. Political science, like all academic disciplines, has its own particular language;

(continued)

**TABLE 7.4** (continued)

Evil genius	Motivation	Sample essay question	Sample essay response	Analysis
4. The Jargon-Meister (continued)			This gives Mancur Olson a collective action problem from which he cannot reasonably be expected to recover . . .	complex concepts and ideas are expressed through specialised terms that sometimes appear impenetrable to the uninitiated. Learning to wield these terms effectively is part of doing political science well, but their use should not get in the way of making a clear and accessible argument.
5. The Bait-and-Switch Artist	The Bait-and-Switch Artist is a master of prestidigitation. She engages in a sleight-of-hand in which she substitutes a new essay question for the one that appears on the page — and (poof!) the original essay question magically disappears. Her calling card is often the word ‘while’.	Evaluate Theda Skocpol’s argument on the origins of social revolutions.	While Theda Skocpol makes many interesting and important arguments about the origins of social revolutions, the concept of political culture is also extremely relevant. Political culture can be defined as the array of beliefs and norms in a given society relating to the legitimacy of political actors and political institutions . . .	The Bait-and-Switch Artist may go on to write a brilliant essay, but not one that answers the question that was originally asked. Of course, highlighting your knowledge in particular areas is a useful strategy when writing exam essays, but if the response provided fails to address the question asked, even the most insightful essay will not receive much attention from the marker.
6. The Knee-Jerk Nihilist	The Knee-Jerk Nihilist is the most sophisticated, most dangerous, and most evil of the geniuses. He has probably taken an introductory course in literary theory, quantum physics or postmodernism, but has forgotten most of what he learned. The one thing he took away from these courses, though, was a fundamental conviction that the world around us is just too complicated and too contradictory for us to make any sense of it.	What makes a political system democratic?	Democracy is a relative concept. In fact, the concept of ‘concept’ is also relative. Words mean whatever we want them to ‘mean’, and this is especially true for ‘democracy’. For some, it means ‘free’ elections. For others, it means keeping your own thugs ‘in power’ and keeping the enemy thugs ‘out of power’. No-one can ever give a coherent definition, because it always depends on the context. And since the ‘context’ is always shifting, the ‘concept’ of ‘democracy’ also shifts . . .	The Knee-Jerk Nihilist is smart. He has read a great deal and thought seriously about issues. He has become so disillusioned about the possibility of our arriving at any real understanding of the world, however, that he has mortgaged his powers of analysis for a modish slavery to intellectual scepticism. He also believes that because all our judgements are clouded by our own prejudices, anyone’s opinion is as good as anyone else’s. The Knee-Jerk Nihilist is often seen wearing black and reading Nietzsche. He is very fond of quotation marks.

Source: King (1998).

## SUMMARY

The essay is a particular genre of writing that is at the heart of academic writing today. Criteria of excellence in this genre have been identified, and should be observed. All essay writers want high marks, and there should be nothing, apart from not doing the hard preparatory work and not observing the codes and protocols of good essay writing, that should limit them from achieving these marks.

Good essay writing depends upon striking a balance between fact and opinion, and avoiding imbalance and bias. Solid research can create good foundations for the essay, and synthesis of data obtained in research can help writers obtain original perspectives. Sources and proofs should be credible and authoritative, locatable, up to date, relevant, convincing, in proportion, ethically clean, and matched to the context. Essays are structured in three parts: introduction, body and conclusion. Thesis statements can help clarify the writer's approach, and paragraphing, topic sentences, linking words and headings are effective means of laying out and structuring an argument. It is vital to stay focused – answering the question and not wandering or waffling along the way. Use clear style and make clear statements of argument – modifying the thrust of the argument where appropriate. Students should also remember to use the authorial voice and layout style most acceptable to assessors.

## KEY TERMS

assertion *p.* 227

authorial voice *p.* 237

bias *p.* 229

boosting *p.* 236

creative doubt *p.* 230

cumulative method *p.* 228

expositional technique  
*p.* 227

hedging *p.* 236

point of view *p.* 227

proofs and

examples *p.* 227

thesis statement *p.* 233

topic sentence *p.* 234

waffle *p.* 235

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Identify three criteria of failure in critical thinking.
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the structure used in Bacon's essay on revenge?
3. What is 'creative doubt'?
4. Identify four factors associated with worthwhile sources and proofs.
5. What role does the topic sentence play in a paragraph?
6. When is it appropriate to use 'I' in writing?
7. Identify three strategies for keeping focused when writing an essay.
8. What is the purpose of judicious hedging?
9. Identify four errors that an essay writer should avoid.
10. Identify and describe three Evil Geniuses of essay writing.

## APPLIED ACTIVITIES

1. Examine some essays you have written, and reconsider the marks given and the comments made by the marker. Assuming the mark and comments are not grossly unfair, can you detect any trends apparent over a number of assignments submitted over time?
2. Consulting one or more books of quotations, find at least ten substantially different quotations on at least one topic: love; money; anger; a discipline or industry you are familiar with; a city you know or, in fact, anything you like. Now use these quotes in

a short essay (400–600 words), creating a structure and context for the quotes using appropriate transitions ('This view is reinforced by the view of ...', 'On the other hand, consider the opinion of ...').

3. Following the pattern of table 7.4, create writing samples from each of the Six Evil Geniuses for a discipline or area you are familiar with (i.e. create Evil Genius type, motivation, sample essay question, sample essay response and analysis).
4. Following the pattern of table 7.4, invent a Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Evil Genius of essay writing, giving Evil Genius type, motivation, sample essay question (in a field or discipline you are familiar with), sample essay response and analysis.

## WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Your studies are going well. In the past eighteen months you have received seven A grades for your essays. It's not easy surviving, though: you have found it difficult to make ends meet while you are studying. Today you received a phone call from a cousin who lives interstate. She's doing a similar course, but is not doing as well as you. She offers you a healthy sum of money if you will email all your essays to her so that she can copy them and hand them in under her own name. She has promised that she will not show them to anyone else, but in the past she has actually forwarded sensitive emails you have sent to her on a confidential basis to her friends. Later today someone tells you that a new national anti-plagiarism database is going to be set up in the next few months. You are only six months away from graduating. The manager at the place where you work part-time rang today and told you that you no longer have the job.

How will you respond to your cousin's request?



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