

Some notes on essay writing



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Some notes on Essay Writing Study Patterns 1. No-one can lay down rules about how to study, but it is worth working out a rhythm that suits you, and that will enable you to make the best of your time as a student. This includes deciding when and where to read as well as how to plan and write an essay. Some people find they are at their best in the mornings while other prefer to work late into the night, so it is a good idea to decide whether you are a lark or an owl and plan accordingly. Can you concentrate best in the Library, or do you prefer to work at home? Do you work best in long, uninterrupted blocks of time, or do you prefer to work in short bursts, with frequent breaks? You also need to recognise that your friends' rhythms may not be the same as yours: some people produce good work by studying through the night sustained on black coffee, others do not. 2. Try to embark on an essay in a positive frame of mind. The best way to do this is to begin work well in advance of the deadline and then you will have time to enjoy your reading. Make sure you allow time to think as well as read; talk about the topic with others, mull it over, re-read your notes, follow-up further references. Writing an essay is like cooking; you may be able to throw everything together quickly in the end, but unless you have decent ingredients it won't taste very good. 3. You should have been shown how to find material in the Library, but if not, there will be someone willing to help with information at the issue desk nearby. But you need first to be sure what material you want. If the reading list is not clear to you, then ask the tutor who prepared it to clarify which material is relevant for your particular essay. Some students seem to feel that it is 'cheating' to talk with the tutor about an essay in preparation. On the contrary, such discussions can be a useful part of the learning process. 4. You will need to decide how much reading to do. A common

difficulty is that students read so much and take so many notes that they exhaust their interest in the topic before they come to try to order their thoughts. If you keep the essay question in mind all the time you should find ideas occurring to you as you read, and then it is easier to decide when to stop reading and begin organising these ideas into an essay. 5. Oddly enough (and this will vary from subject to subject) you may have to learn how not to read books. Unless your study is based closely on particular texts, you will find that you have not enough time to read books all through. Tutors may want you to look at a number of different sources and you have to develop strategies for finding what you need. Some books are like annotated bibliographies, in which case you will probably need to concentrate on one pithy section and then follow up the leads in its footnotes. For books with a more extended treatment of a theme try starting with the Conclusions, and then use the chapter heading and index to direct you to the most relevant sections. [top of page] 6. Taking notes from your reading is a rather personal process, but it is important to try and develop a system that works well for you. It may be helpful to think about why you are reading something, and in relation to writing an essay there are perhaps three main reasons: a. to collect information and ideas, b. to find some good quotations, and c. to trigger ideas of your own. In the case of (a) the best way to take notes is to read the passage or section right through and then summarise the key points in your own words. This is a good basis from which to return to the text for (b), to select appropriate quotations. Obviously you should note down the ideas or comments of your own as they occur to you. When taking notes you should try to avoid extensive quotations. At the time it often seems easier to copy out vast amounts of material than to select and

summarise, but it only postpones thinking. NEVER mark a Library book. It destroys the book for future readers and it is a sign of lazy, sloppy thinking.

7. It is extremely important that when re-reading your notes you can easily identify what type of notes they are. Are they your précis of the content? Are they quotations? Or are they your own ideas? The simplest system is to put quotation marks around quotations, and to put your own ideas in brackets perhaps with your initials (like alterations on a cheque), but some people prefer other methods, such as different coloured pens. In both cases you should include details of the relevant page numbers alongside your notes. Plagiarism (passing off someone else's work as your own), is a serious offence (see Appendix A on Acknowledging your Sources).