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Experience, Meaning of Life



© 2010 Steve Campsall Here's how to write your best essay ever... Whatever the essay you have been asked to write, the key to making it as effective as it can be is to write it as a wellstructured and well-supported argument. You will find that an 'argument' essay is easier to plan, more fulfilling to write and for your teacher (or the examiner)... a pleasure to mark (and that's no bad thing!!). It's important to get one thing out of the way at the outset: an essay question has no 'right' answer. You can breathe easy on that one. It's just not like that. This is English and we leave those kinds of 'right answers' to the mathematicians and scientists. An English essay is not an 'answer' in that way at all, rather, it's an informed opinion; but, like all opinions, it'll require explanation, argument and support. It requires you to argue your case. What's the first thing you do when you set about starting an essay? Many people start by searching through the text on which their essay is based in the hope of finding suitable quotations to help 'answer' the essay question. Well, there's no getting away from this basic process, but there are ways to make it altogether more efficient, useful and most importantly, more likely to earn a higher grade. More on this later. The Argument Essay The secret of a good essay? Write it as an argument for what you believe! What is there to argue about? Plenty! You'll be arguing to support your point of view on the essay question - one that you've boldly stated in the opening lines of the essay! " This is what I believe and I'm going to show you why I believe it..! " This is a view you'll have developed after careful reflection and consideration on what the essay question or title asks or states. The trick is to be able to condense this view down into a brief and succinct statement. i, i, This becomes what is called your thesis statement. Writing an essay as an

argument makes it easier to keep the essay focused, clear and logical; not only that but what you write is much more likely to stay in line with the essay question. This means that you won't lose marks through waffling, generalising or re-telling. Essays are about opinions, not facts. It's worth repeating that one of the most interesting aspects of English essays is that there can never be a straightforward 'right' answer. This doesn't mean you can't get things wrong through, for example, misinterpreting the text, but it does mean that the 'answer' to any essay will always be your opinion or point of view: essays deal in opinions, not facts. This is why your teacher is looking to read in your essay your views and why you have come to think in this particular way. How do you arrive at an 'overriding' point of view? This is the hardest part of the essay, for sure. Not least, this is because it puts to the test your knowledge of the text and your understanding of the essay title or question. The good news is that when it's done and done well, the remainder of the essay becomes so very much more straightforward to write. But it's easier than might be imagined. Imagine for a moment that, instead of being asked to write your essay, you were asked to answer the same question in class. What would be expected of you? A thousand-word reply? Of course not. What would be wanted is for you to give a highly condensed answer - a kind of overall conclusion or 'take' on the essay question. You might begin this with something like, 'From my understanding of the text, I think that...'. In the written essay, this 'take' on the question is central to making the essay an argument. You write it at the beginning of the essay and this becomes the single controlling idea that flows throughout the remaining paragraphs of the essay. It is the idea that holds the essay

together, helping it flow with seeming logic and naturalness. More later. *ii*.

Because the 'thesis statement' is your 'condensed answer' to the essay question, it provides exactly the kind of strong initial focus that will allow you to go on to create a highly focused and structured essay. This is just the kind of essay to which examiners and teachers give the highest marks. The

Argument Essay's Outline Structure

FIRST PARAGRAPH This is a clear, condensed statement of your overall viewpoint on the essay topic or question. This statement is then slightly expanded by providing a succinct summation (i. e. a kind of list) of what will form the main points of your argument. These early few sentences together act to provide the major 'signposts' that show the general direction of the essay and its argument. *ii*.

ii. To provide an account of the so-called big picture of the text - and thus to set an authoritative tone that suggests you know the text well - the opening paragraph also needs to have a highly condensed account of the text's 'story' and 'circumstance' - but one that is tightly focused on the needs of the essay title or question. The opening paragraph sometimes also needs to include brief details of the author's context, but only if entirely relevant and important to the essay question. *ii*,§ Notice how, all of the time, you are avoiding waffle and generalised comment, instead keeping all you write tightly focused on the needs of the essay title or question.

BODY PARAGRAPHS A series of paragraphs follows with each being developed around a single important and wholly relevant point. *ii*. Far, far too often essay paragraphs open in ways that do not show that the student is in some important way clearly and directly developing the essay's 'answer' or argument. This kind of 'off-target' opening leads to waffle and generalisation

and... lost marks. Try hard to avoid this by opening each and every paragraph with a topic sentence - one that contains the main argument of the paragraph. The point around which each paragraph is based needs to provide justification for the thesis statement given in the opening paragraph. The points must do no more than develop the argument and each point must be supported with evidence, often in the form of a quotation taken from the text, along with an explanation of how this evidence 'works' both as an effective use of language and as a contribution to the text.

CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH This is a restatement of the opening argument, a listing of the main points and a comment on the wider implications of the findings. Using Quotations It will help to think back to the imaginary classroom situation. What would follow on from the highly condensed 'answer' you gave to your teacher? Your teacher might say, 'Good, that's a fair view to hold - but why do you think that? Show me from the text itself what made you think that way.' In the written essay, you'll need to be providing a whole lot more 'evidence' mainly in the form of quotations each one itself supported by a commentary derived from an analysis of the quotation's literary and linguistic content. However, with a central and guiding argument starting off and flowing through the entire essay, it now becomes much easier to search the text for aspects and quotations that will provide good quality evidence to support the essay's points.

• • • • • In general, you should be aiming for one brief but apt quotation per paragraph. Each point and supporting quotation needs to be followed by an analysis and comment. Some teachers call this the PEE (point > example > explanation) or PQC (point > quotation > comment) system. This is needed to explain how and why the aspect of

the text or the quotation 'works' within the context of the essay question and the originally stated argument. Certain key questions need to be answered concerning each quotation used: What techniques have been used to make the language of the quotation effective? This means discussing the writer's methods, e. g. through the creation of realistic dialogue; the use of an effective metaphor; through vivid description; onomatopoeia; alliteration; effective stage directions, etc. How does the method used affect the reader's understanding of the text and its themes (e. g. 'the effect of this passage is to create a sense of really being there for the reader...')? Why was this method used (i. e. what was the writer's purpose)? E. g. 'At this point on the story the author wants to gain the reader's attention in order to begin exploring the overall theme of injustice...' MARK GRABBING TIP No. 1! Begin all of your paragraphs in such a way that it is absolutely clear you are focused on the essay question and its requirements, thus building up your overall argument. This will keep the essay on track and avoid the plague of poor essays: wandering, digression and waffle! What if your essay title isn't in the form of a question? If you think about it, all essays titles are a kind of question. They have to be because they are asking for your opinion about something. However, if your essay title doesn't easily lend itself to you seeing it as a type of question, your teacher will almost certainly be willing to alter it into one if you ask. For example, if you were given the title, 'Discuss Shakespeare's presentation of ambition in Macbeth', you could mentally consider this as, 'How and why does Shakespeare present the theme of ambition in Macbeth?'. If you think about it, you'll see that both of these essay titles are all-but identical and will lead to the same final essay.

When considered as a question, you will often find it is easier to generate that all-important single main point of view to it - the main idea upon which you will then base the remainder of your essay. Here is an example of a main idea succinctly stated (i. e. thesis statement) that could be used to create an argument essay from the above question: ' In my essay, I shall be arguing that Shakespeare presents the theme of ambition in his play, Macbeth, through the play's two major characters, Lord and Lady Macbeth, and that this theme is brought to a terrible conclusion as the play progresses.'

The remainder of this - or any other - essay must then be no more than a linked series of points with each point explained, developed and supported in a paragraph of its own. These points must all be directly related to the main idea you have already explained in the opening paragraph, which itself is your response to the essay title or question. Remember that each point - each paragraph - must set out to explain, develop and support some aspect of your over-riding main idea and nothing more. In this example, the paragraph that follows the opening paragraph - the first of what is called the body paragraphs of your essay - could be based on the point that the theme of ambition is shown through what Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are given by Shakespeare to say and do in Act One of the play. The third paragraph of your essay - its second body paragraph - might then explore, develop and support how the theme of ambition is shown through these two characters in some part of Act 2, and so on... Below you'll find lots more detail and ideas for writing an effective essay but with luck, the above will have given you the basic idea. **MARK-GRABBING TIP No 2!** Aim to ' integrate' words or phrases from the text you are studying directly into your own sentences (still using

quotation marks, of course). Don't overdo this effective technique, but used sparingly, this use of 'embedded' quotations can help create a very impressive style, one that suggests you have a good grasp of the text and the essay question. Here are some examples of how to use embedded quotations. The first is from the opening of John Steinbeck's novel, 'Of Mice and Men': "Small and quick" George is presented by Steinbeck as a character in complete contrast to his 3 friend, the lumbering and "shapeless" Lennie.... Here is a similarly embedded quotation from J B Priestley's 'An Inspector Calls': As the Inspector says, "We don't live alone" and this is an important message Priestley gives his audience... Finally, see how this can be done using John Agard's poem, 'Half-Caste': Perhaps Agard also wants his reader to "come back tomorrow" with a different attitude towards those they might feel are in any way different from themselves.

MORE TIPS AND MORE DETAIL! Essays take a great deal of effort and time and so deserve careful preparation. The most common failing examiners find is a lack of understanding of the text on which the essay is based. This is to take the road signposted 'Failure'. But you're heading elsewhere.... So... get to know your text well. You won't succeed if you don't! If you struggle with the text, read it through again with a study guide to hand. Also, talk the text over with friends or your teacher. There is more help with specific texts here. Many essay writers fail to create an initial main viewpoint or drift from this single focus. This loses marks as it leads to waffle, vagueness and generalisation. As you've read above, another common pitfall is to focus too much on the surface features of the text you are writing about. This happens when you write at length about the

meaning of the text, i. e. by telling what happens in it. o In effect, all you are doing when you do this is to retell the story of the text. o Instead, you should focus on answering the essay question by interpreting the text's layers of meaning. o You need to be discussing how and why the author has created an effective text through careful, interesting and effective choices of style and language as well as structure. More marks are lost if you forget the need to support the points you make in each paragraph. o A good idea is to try to use at least one quotation - or reference to the text - per paragraph. ï, ï, Remember, too, that this is an English essay and this means you need to reflect how authors use language and literary techniques in effective ways in their writing. o Aim only to choose quotations that contain important elements in them that will allow you to discuss in depth aspects of, for example, their literary style, language or structure. o Consider discussing, for example, how the quotation acts to build tension, mood, character, a sense of place or how it helps explore one of the text's themes. o Discuss, too, how the quotation works both at the point it occurs and as a contribution to the whole, i. e. the way it helps the writer achieve his or her purpose. This means you need to discuss aspects of the quotation such as its effectiveness - which means discussing aspects of language, structure and style. STEP-BY-STEP...

1. DEVELOP A STRONG INITIAL FOCUS FOR YOUR ESSAY The word ' essay' comes from a French word meaning ' attempt': your essay is your attempt to argue for your point of view, a view that when succinctly expressed is called a thesis statement. ï, This ' thesis statement' needs to be an idea you developed based on an interpretation of whatever aspect of the text is asked in the essay question. Interpretation means considering how a text operates

at different levels; it is your interpretation of the text that will be at the heart of the essay: an interpretation that must support the overall thesis statement.

2. FIND SOLID SUPPORT FOR YOUR VIEWPOINT You will need to search through the text and note down a series of aspects and quotations that can be used to support the overall view you have developed.

4. Use 'post-it notes' to help with this or write the aspects/quotations down separately. Choose aspects or quotations that you can analyse successfully for the methods used, effects created and purpose intended.

3. WRITE AN EFFECTIVE OPENING PARAGRAPH Use your introductory paragraph to state your point of view, i. e. your thesis statement. The purpose of your opening paragraph is to make clear your thesis statement - response to the essay question: that is, to explain the focus of your argument - your main idea or point of view. Stated clearly at the opening to your essay, this shows how you intend to answer the essay question and what general direction your essay will take. Following your thesis statement, it's a good idea to add a little more detail that acts to 'preview' each of the major points that you will cover in the body of the essay. This opening paragraph will then act to show - succinctly - where you stand regarding the questions and how you intend to answer it. Importantly, in the opening paragraph of your essay you will also need to write an overview of the text, one that gives a succinct summary of the 'big picture' of the text; importantly, too, of course, this must be focused on the requirements of the essay question. Giving a succinct account of the big picture of the text in the opening paragraph will show that you have engaged with and digested the detail of three key aspects of the essay: the essay question, the text and its author - perhaps

also, a brief account of the author's context. Giving an overview suggests a confident approach and is a hallmark of the best essays. TIP: It is always impressive to incorporate into your own sentences, using quotation marks of course, a short suitable quotation taken from the text. Some teachers call this using embedded quotations. Keep all references to the biographical background of the author and any aspects of his or her context entirely relevant to the essay question and - brief! Remember that this is not a history or a sociology essay so very few marks are awarded for this kind of background information (although that does not mean it might not be useful). The majority of marks in an English essay are awarded for the quality of analysis and interpretation you show - that is, an awareness of the author's uses of the English language and literary uses of this. If your essay title does concern aspects of context try hard to discuss context by deriving your comments from quotations rather than by merely discussing aspects of context; in other words allow the text to introduce the context. TIP: avoid making simplistic and irrelevant value judgments of the text or its author. Saying that Shakespeare is ' a wonderful author' or that you think ' Of Mice and Men' is ' really good' will gain no marks whatsoever - this is no more than a kind of waffle that fills space with empty words that add nothing useful to your essay.

4. USE THE REMAINING PARAGRAPHS EFFECTIVELY
POINT > EXAMPLE > EXPLAIN Follow the opening paragraph with a number of paragraphs that form the ' body' of the essay. Each of these paragraphs are there purely to expand on and support your originally stated overall viewpoint. Having stated your main idea in your opening paragraph, now you need explore this, develop it and provide support from

the text for this. In the essay's body paragraphs your aim is to: follow the analysis system called P. E. E. or P. Q. C. work through the text's structure logically and, highlighting via the use of quotations, explain how these led you to develop your point of view; comment on how the language of each of these parts led you to form your interpretation: why did the author choose 5 this particular type of language to make this point in this way? How does it help a) the audience and b) the writer's purpose or theme? i, i, discuss how this individual part of the text forms a useful structural part of the text by leading the reader towards an overall understanding of the themes, messages or purposes of the text; CRUCIALLY... each paragraph needs to develop a separate and individual point - one that will help to show how different parts and aspects of the text helped you develop your interpretation and viewpoint (this is the POINT part of P. E. E.); A useful tip is to open each paragraph with a topic sentence. This is a sentence that clearly makes a point that is developing your argument - your answer to the essay question - and, because it is, therefore, clearly focused on the essay question, it will keep your writing on track; Always aim to provide support for each of the points you make by referring directly to the text (this is the EXAMPLE part of P. E. E.). i, i, o You normally do this by quoting briefly from a relevant part of the text but you might choose to describe an event. i,§ It's very important NOT to write a long description of WHAT happens. If you do you are merely 'retelling the story' - this loses many marks. i,§ In a play you also lose marks if you do not discuss aspects of the staging and stage action. You will need to follow each quotation with an explanation of and a discussion on aspects of the language the author used in the quotation; this

means discussing, for example, how aspects of the quotations literary, poetic or dramatic language works, including mentioning the method the writer used, the effect the language creates and the reasons this might have been done (this is the EXPLAIN part of P. E. E). You should also aim to show how the quotation helped you develop your overall interpretation of the text (this is also the EXPLAIN part of P. E. E).

o o 5. CREATE A LOGICAL STRUCTURE

Always work in a clear way through the text, from beginning to end. Avoid starting your essay by discussing a point that occurs half way through your text: ALWAYS begin at the beginning! Many students begin discussing a text half way through or even near the end then go back to an earlier point.

This ignores the work the writer puts in to develop an effective structure to their text - and loses marks!

6. CONCLUDE EFFECTIVELY The conclusion to an essay is important but causes problems for some students. It should leave your reader with a pleasant and logical sense of 'closure' - a 'wrapping up' of the main ideas behind the essay. Refer back to your opening argument - but to try to avoid any simple repetition of its wording.

Follow on with a succinct bringing together of your main points (again, avoiding simple repetition of the same words): list or summarise the main points from the preceding paragraphs (use the topic sentences from each paragraph to give you these). End by identifying any wider implications that you feel arise from what you have found and explored. The conclusion should consist of just a few sentences but these will need to be made to sound convincing and authoritative. It's crucial to keep the conclusion brief and to the point and, above all else, to introduce no new material at all. WRITE ANALYTICALLY, NOT 'DESCRIPTIVELY' Here is an example of how many students go wrong;

don't worry, you won't - but this is a very common mistake: In William Shakespeare's play, 'Romeo and Juliet', these are the first two lines of the 'Prologue' as spoken by 'The 6 Chorus': 'Two households, both alike in dignity, In fair Verona, where we lay our scene...' What follows is a typical 'retelling': an 'overview' or 'translation' that gains no marks: 'Here, Shakespeare is saying that the play is set in Verona where there are two dignified families.' Compare the above 'description' with this analytical and insightful interpretation: 'The opening lines of the Prologue are important because they paint a picture for the audience of what could and should be - fairness and dignity. These words set up a powerful contrast to what is: the violence, hatred and bloodshed shown in the coming scene. It will be against this violent backdrop that the pure love of Romeo and Juliet will have to struggle.' Which approach and style would gain the higher mark?

KEY THINGS TO LOOK FOR AND WRITE ABOUT IN ALL TEXTS FOUR KEY ASPECTS THAT WILL HELP FORM THE BASIS OF AN ESSAY: AN ANALYSIS OF FORM, CONTENT, STRUCTURE AND STYLE FORM This is something many students ignore and yet it can create the basis for some highly subtle and useful points and subtlety is always highly rewarded with high marks! When you consider the form of a text, you will be analysing how aspects other than the meaning of its language help it in important ways. You yourself make use of the form of language, for instance, when you choose to say a word or phrase loudly or softly, or when you email or text a friend and write in all capital letters (a use of form that signals you are 'shouting'). Also, when you create short or long sentences or paragraphs you are affecting the look - the form - of your writing and, in subtle ways, this will affect the way the writing is

received and understood. i, A novelist makes use of form by writing in sentences and paragraphs of varying lengths (you can imagine the effect a very short sentence, or a one-line paragraph, for example). The use of dialogue (spoken words shown inside speech marks) is also an effective use of form, as is the use of underlining, bold or italics - or, in non-fiction texts, the inclusion of bullet points or sections. Poets are acutely aware of and very creative with the use of form. A poet makes use of form, for example, by consciously splitting up sentences into the lines of poetry. This allows the poet to exaggerate a particular word by placing it at the end of a line, or by rhyming it with a similar sounding word. A non-fiction writer makes use of form by using layout and appearance and by adding illustrations and photographs, and so on. All writers use form by using patterns of sound, such as by using alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia, assonance and so on. A playwright, of course, uses form very differently. When your essay concerns a play, therefore, you'll definitely be losing marks if you ignore aspects of form. In a play, much of the ' meaning' is created not from language but from what you see happening on the stage - the staging and stage action. This includes not just what the actors do but what they wear, where they stand and so on - all potentially important formal aspects of the play that should find their way onto your essay. i, i, i, i, 7 Form is always worthy of comment if it adds, even if subtly, to the meaning - the content - of a text. CONTENT Words not only have form, they also contain meaning - this is called their content. Form and content are like two sides of a coin. There are several ways that writers are able to make use of the content of language that are creative, interesting to readers and effective in engaging

their attention: Literal Meaning Every word and phrase has a literal meaning. This is its basic dictionary meaning - a 'basic' meaning that is also called its denotation. E. g. 'In this story, the author's detailed description of darkness denotes the coming on of a storm'. Figurative Meaning This is away of playing with the meaning of words that can certainly help make writing more vivid, emotional and interesting. Words and phrases can be used outside of their literal context and be given a different kind of meaning called a connotation. Using connotation or figurative language, a writer can easily create more than one layer of meaning - especially emotional meaning (don't forget words create both meaning and feeling). The most common way this is done is to use a word not for its literal meaning but for its metaphorical meaning. Another way is to use a word that acts as a symbol for a different meaning altogether. E. g. 'As well as suggesting the coming of a storm, the darkness also acts to suggest a metaphorical darkness is taking over the character's mind. In this way the darkness seems to be symbolising a kind of evil'. Using a pun - a play on words - is another way that meaning can be played with in an interesting way. Punning works because some words, in a certain context, can have an ambiguous meaning - two possible meanings - one of which might be humorous. Irony Irony is another important way through which language can create more than one layer of meaning. Unlike sarcasm which is a form of irony that is intended usually to hurt someone's feelings and is rather crude and easy, irony is more subtle, sophisticated and witty; altogether a more intelligent use of language. But irony can also be difficult to recognise - yet it is probably true to say that irony is one of the most common means by which a sophisticated writer

creates layers of meaning in a text. *i*, Irony can engage readers closely with a text because, rather like solving a puzzle, there is enjoyment and satisfaction in unpicking the levels of meaning created by the irony. Creating an 'ironic tone of voice' in writing is much harder than in speech because the original sound of voice and facial expression or body language of the speaker are absent. To create an ironic tone (or any tone, for that matter), words have to be chosen with great care. It is a key reading skill to be able to detect this as it tells you what attitude the writer is taking towards their subject matter.

STRUCTURE The content of a text is never available immediately (except in a single word, maybe: STOP!). Meaning needs to be built up throughout a text in ways that are often important to the overall effect on the listener or reader. This is the structure of the text. *i*, Structure is the way a writer consciously 'shapes' a piece of writing in an attempt to make it as effective as possible for their audience and their purpose. *ii*, It is important to comment on the structure of a text, e. g. 'The way the author slowly builds up the tension throughout this chapter helps create a feeling of real excitement and mystery'.

STYLE Style is the way a writer or speaker consciously chooses language and language features to suit a particular audience to achieve a specific purpose. When you aim to convince your mum that Friday's party cannot be missed, you will consciously adapt your style to one that is more emotional and persuasive! *8 ii*, *ii*, Some famous writers have a particular style of their own that is quickly recognisable. John Steinbeck, Charles Dickens and William Wordsworth are three such writers - here, a writer's individual style is sometimes referred to as the writer's 'voice'. Your primary job when analysing and discussing a text is to comment

on its style - on what are called the stylistic or language choices its writer has made, especially those that seem to you to have been chosen to create a particular effect to achieve a certain purpose. So... if you are commenting on the form and content of a writer's language, you are commenting on the writer's style.

COMPARING TWO OR MORE TEXTS

Even though it's a central part of the mark scheme, and always made clear in the essay question or title, each year many students still manage to write their comparison exam answer or coursework essay and forget to compare and contrast the texts...
i, i, i, i. Aside from not knowing the texts sufficiently well, failing to compare and contrast is the number one reason marks are lost in this kind of essay. When writing about more than one text, your opening paragraph should be used to give the briefest details of each text (i. e. your writing needs to be succinct!). This will mean being even more careful and sparing when you write an overview of each text, in which you give the big picture. It's vital to keep everything relevant and tightly focused on the requirements of the essay question and your argument. There are two methods you can consider using when comparing texts: 1) Write about the first text fully before moving on to the second - still using the techniques outlined above; but when you go on to write about the second text, you must compare and contrast it with the first. 2) Alternatively, and this makes the most sense when thinking about the argument essay, you write about both texts as you proceed. This allows you still, as shown above, to create a central argument, one in which examples to support the points are taken from one or both texts as relevant to the point. i, i, This second method is the more complex and sophisticated of the two. You will still need to open each paragraph with a point that helps

answer the essay question, i. e. a point that supports your overall view stated in the opening paragraph. 9