

# Principles of essay writing

# Beginning to write

- Read around the subject, make notes
- Prepare a plan, just bullet points
- Decide on the right order for the bullet points
- Expand each bullet point into a paragraph
  - essay plan becomes the final essay

# General principles

- A statement in writing is a bid for attention
- Communication of:
  - workmanship
  - credibility
  - respect for the reader
    - remember to always address the reader's nagging question – so what? Why am I spending my time reading this? Why is it useful to me?

# Elements of the essay I: introduction

- Purpose of an introduction:
  - Sets the scene (briefly mention key actors, events)
  - Puts the issue in a wider context
    - Answers the reader's question: '*Why is the essay question important?*'
  - Tells the reader roughly how you are going to answer the essay question
    - but avoids general, bland statements
    - Also, it is not a conclusion. Hold the reader's attention by intriguing them.
- Consider re-writing it once the essay is written

# Elements of the essay II: main body

- Develop from bullet points (written at the essay plan stage)
- Start with the broad, background points to set the scene
  - Technological, economic, social trends.  
Previous political history
- Then advance chronologically, or conceptually, building the argument with each successive paragraph

# N.B. Every paragraph must relate to the essay question

- Keep the reader's question in mind at all times: 'so what?' i.e. *How does this paragraph help to answer the essay question?*
- Make sure that the reader knows why you have written each paragraph *by the end of the first sentence.*
- Summarise what you have shown in that paragraph at the end of it (i.e. how you have shown the paragraph related to the essay question), before leading in to the next smoothly.

# Elements of the essay III: conclusion

- Bring all the threads of your argument together
- Ideally, using what you have discussed, forge a new synthesis of knowledge!
  - i.e. the conclusion should not merely be a restatement of the introduction
  - Leave your reader feeling satisfied
- Try to distil your argument down to one or two sentences, and state them convincingly

# To write a 1<sup>st</sup> class essay you need to go beyond simple exposition

- Ideally the narrative should be beautifully crafted, with relevant facts, cogent analysis and poetic turns of phrase
- What comes next? Hold attention by means of anticipation
  - Insert small surprises. Jolt reader awake with something unexpected now and again.
- Unidirectional. Reader should never have to stop, look back, or look ahead
- Footnotes: no stopping; no argument, no detail. Only bibliographical refs *with page numbers*
- Read out loud to check it flows well

# Finally, some practices to avoid

- Avoid talking in the present tense about historical events
- Avoid defining commonplace words
- Avoid quoting historians at length when you could paraphrase just as easily. Only quote historians when their point is contentious and pointedly worded.
- Avoid using phrases such as “I believe”
- Avoid the passive voice whenever possible. Be direct.