

Eight useful tips

... for writing essays for continuous assessment or exams

1. The most important thing to remember in writing an essay is to answer the question.

The most straightforward way, although not the only way, to do this is to answer the question in the first sentence or two of your essay. Then your reader knows exactly where your essay is going.

Remember: an essay is an argument which has been constructed in answer to a question. It is a piece of *persuasive* writing.

An essay is not a mystery story. It is generally not appropriate to leave the 'answer' until the end.

If you are unable to decide what the answer should be, it can be helpful to write your way out of the problem. This can sometimes be a useful strategy, particularly if you can't see the way through the woods!

However, this should not then become your essay. This is a preliminary stage, and, for a course-work essay, might form part of the reflection in a Note-book. You need to re-work your 'thinking on paper' in order to construct a coherent and structured argument.

2. An essay should have a strong introduction.

Your introduction is the place where you set out your stall.

It is a good place to say what your answer to the question is, and the points you are going to use in order to answer it. This it makes it clear to your reader exactly what the direction of your essay is going to be.

Essay writing is not about surprises. You need to help your reader as much as you can, so that they can understand what you are trying to say.

3. An essay needs to have a clear structure.

As we said above, an essay is an argument. For this reason, you need to have definite points, which help build-up your argument, and answer the question.

This means you need to plan your essay carefully.

Some people like to plan their essays using spider diagram. These can be very useful for 'brainstorming' the points you need to answer the question, but it is important to bear in mind that a written argument is linear. That is, each of your points needs to follow consecutively from each other. That means you need to think very carefully about the arrangement of your points. Once you know the points you want to use, try numbering them in order to find the most effective sequence.

Causes of the Peloponnesian War

- 1. Athenian imperialism*
- 2. Spartan fear*
- 3. Pressure from Corinth*
- 4. Truest reason and causes*

4. Each point needs to be introduced clearly.

Introducing each point with a topic sentence is an effective way to make your point clear. A topic sentence says exactly what your point is and how it relates to the question. Tying each of your points securely to the question is a good way of keeping your essay (and you!) focussed.

5. An essay should be a response to the primary evidence.

In your preparation for writing an essay, the most important thing to read is the ancient evidence, and your answer to the question should respond to the ancient material. Some students make the mistake of reading all the secondary literature, but forget to read the ancient texts themselves.

We are trying to teach you how to respond to ancient material, so in your essays the ancient sources should be the focus of your response.

This does not mean that you shouldn't read secondary authors. You need to read as widely as possible in the secondary literature in order to help you understand and work through issues, and to inform your thinking about problems and possible solutions.

You also need to make sure that your essays are properly referenced to the primary sources as well as the secondary literature. You should give ALL references to primary material, not just direct quotations. This not only grounds your essay in the ancient sources, but also helps you to keep them as your focus.

For course-work essays, references to primary sources should be precise, while in exams they can be more general.

For example, in a course-work essay you might write:

Herodotus (8.144.2) sets out a clear definition of what *Greekness* is.

However, in an exam, it would be possible to say:

Herodotus in Book 8 sets out a clear definition of what *Greekness* is.

6. An essay should reflect YOUR response to the question.

In writing essays, we are trying to teach and assess how YOU are able to respond to the evidence, think for yourself, and construct an argument. Your thinking can and should be informed by the thoughts of others. No one expects (or wants) you to reinvent the wheel!

7. Your essay should be properly documented.

It is important that you give credit where credit is due. You **MUST** provide proper documentation in your essay for all secondary authors. To use someone else's words or thoughts without recognising that they are not your own is intellectual theft. It is called plagiarism and will be heavily penalised. There are proper conventions for documenting essays, which should be followed.

8. Use your conclusion to sum up your points and show how they answer the question.

Just as an essay needs a strong introduction, it also needs a good conclusion. This does not mean restating your introduction.

In the introduction you show what you are going to do and how you are going to do it.

In the body of your essay you set out your individual arguments.

The conclusion is where you draw up all your threads back together again, and show how collectively your points all add up to answering the question.