Guidelines for Essay Writing

Introduction

This is a summary of some ideas on the correct approach to preparing and writing history essays. It should be stressed that this is not a magic formula which must be followed to the letter. It is, instead, a set of guidelines which it is hoped will help students to gain more from their written work. It is also worth noting that every tutor has his/her own personal approach to essays and that if you are concerned about any particular points of detail you should contact them in person.

Reading

(i) General Points

- Never leave your essay until the last minute. If you do you will almost certainly be unable to get hold of the necessary books.
- Use bibliographies provided and / or consult your tutor in order to decide which books you should read.
- Make use of the Short Loan system and both the Class Library and the Main Library.

(ii) What to Read?

Most of you will be used to reading, and perhaps relying upon, secondary sources (those written by historians, drawing upon primary evidence), in order to gather information. Modern secondary works might, for example, contain an up-to-date summary of the perceived narrative of the events which they are dealing, and a detailed analysis of the importance and / or context of those events. But historians draw their information from a wide variety of primary sources, which might include chronicles, letters, or official documents, written at or around the time of the events to which they relate. A vital part of studying history at degree level is developing your own ability to use the primary sources. Therefore, although you will almost certainly have to read a variety of secondary works in order to give yourself a general over-view of a period, it is always also advisable to examine primary sources related to your topic if they are available.

(i) Using a critical approach

Adopt a basic attitude of suspicion of everything you read. This goes for both primary and secondary sources. It may be fairly disconcerting to realise that history does not deal with hard facts, that there is no text book to which you can turn to find the truth about what happened in a given period. Appreciating this fact is, however,
another key aspect of studying history at this level.

- You must learn to question all primary source materials that you read, and to accept that differently secondary works may well give different accounts of both the narrative and analysis of an event.
- This does not mean that you can casually challenge the view of any historian. Clearly, if you wish to question the perceived norm you must have evidence to support your case.