

Essay Writing in Economics – Useful Advice

This document is primarily aimed at students writing an essay. Much of the advice also applies to other forms of assignment (e.g. projects and dissertation). However, be aware that some of the advice given may not apply specifically to these other forms of assessment. Please make use your course handbook as your primary source of advice and information.

1. Read recommended material.

- For most (but not all) pieces of work you will be given a recommended reading list by your lecturer. This contains the information your lecturer thinks is important for you to write your essay. Your lecturer may also give you some extra advice regarding which material is most important to read. Normally your lecture notes and core materials (often textbooks) are the best place to start, build on that with extra recommended readings.

2. Make sure you answer the question

- Make sure you understand the question. Don't start to write an essay unless you are confident you understand what you are doing.
- Make sure you are focused on answering the question. That is, answer the question you are asked.
- Perhaps reformulate question in your own words to make sure you understand it.
- Students sometimes hand in excellent work, but fail to answer the question asked (i.e. the material in the essay is not relevant) – this results in a significantly lower grade.

3. Your essay should be 'full'

- You should include as much relevant material as you can within the constraints of your word limit.
- In your preparation it is a good idea to identify central issues (main points) and less central issues (additional points). Lectures (and material in tutorials / labs) and core readings should help you make this distinction.
- Make sure you properly explain/discuss main points.
- Make use of additional material where appropriate and where it can add to the essay.

- Be careful when devoting significant space in your essay to the discussion of issues that are not central. Make sure this is not at the expense of a good discussion of central issues.
- Normally a marker will expect a full / detailed discussion of central issues.
- Do not include irrelevant material.
- When preparing, a good idea is to jot down all the issues you think are relevant, then identify the issues you think are central to the essay question.
- If you do research beyond the recommended reading – well done. If you include this extra material in your essay you are likely to get credit for it as long as it is relevant, well explained, and it does not detract from other central elements of your essay (i.e. note the issues raised above).

4. Show your understanding / be accurate

- Markers look for evidence that you have a strong understanding of the material you are discussing. It is important you demonstrate this in your essay.
- Even if your essay includes all the information that is relevant, if the marker feels your discussion shows you do not have a strong understanding of the subject you are likely to get a lower grade.
- Where discussion goes over the correct material but is inaccurate (i.e. includes errors) this obviously betrays a lack of understanding.
- There may be other reasons why an essay betrays a lack of understanding. For example, discussion that follows recommended reading very closely (i.e. is derivative), or consists of extensive quotes also is suggestive of a lack of understanding. Discussion that lacks rigour or important detail, or is difficult to follow or otherwise poorly written may also suggest a lack of understanding (some of these issues are discussed below).

5. Structure your essay

- Structure your essay sensibly. Don't meander and repeat yourself. Include an introduction and a conclusion.
- Sensibly break down your essay into additional sections as appropriate. Use headings (and sub-headings) where appropriate. E.g. if there are four main issues you wish to discuss perhaps include four sections (headings) additional to your introduction and conclusion. This indicates the structure of your arguments to the marker and makes the essay more readable.
- Your introduction should include a (very) brief outline of your essay – what you plan to do.

- There should be a clear conclusion to your essay, even if it is very brief, where you summarise your main findings / conclusions. Conclusions may include (briefly) possible extensions and/or material you did not have space to cover in the body of the essay.

6. Be coherent and clear

- Try and make your arguments clear and coherent (i.e. it makes sense when you read the essay).
- Material that is ‘correct’ but that is poorly explained and difficult to follow and / or reveals a lack of understanding by the writer will get a lower mark.
- Don’t try and impress a marker by using especially long words and complicated sentences. If you don’t understand what you write it is unlikely the reader will either.
- ‘Straightforwardly’ explain the points you make in your own words, making use of relevant terminology.
- Check your essay for clarity and quality of argument. Re-read your first draft – also check spelling. If you wish, get a friend to proof read it. A good essay should be ‘readable’
- Please note: if you get a friend to proof read your essay (or any other assignment) and they correct the language or grammar used, you must acknowledge this. Please see your Course Handbook for more information.
- You can quote material where you believe it adds to or illustrates your arguments. Material you quote should be contained within “inverted commas” (or ‘inverted commas’). Quoted sources should be acknowledged and referenced in the text (see section 10). If you don’t acknowledge a source or don’t use inverted commas when quoting you are guilty of plagiarism.
- Don’t quote large chunks of material. This suggests to the marker a lack of understanding by the writer. Important points and arguments should always be in your own words. Quotes should add to or illustrate your own discussion – not replace it.

7. Be Rigorous / Use appropriate methods / Use appropriate detail

- Don’t shy away from the appropriate models /diagrams (or other appropriate methods).
- For example use of an appropriate and well explained model or diagram adds to an essay. You can use a diagram from lecture notes, textbooks, etc. as long as you acknowledge the source.
- You do not NEED to use diagrams / models, but often it is very difficult (or indeed impossible) to fully explain an issue without the use of the relevant diagram / model. So where a model / diagram is relevant, and not included, it is likely the essay will be marked down.

- Make sure diagrams / models are integrated into you're discussion. That is, refer to them in order to illustrate / fully explain the issues you discuss. Merely including a correct diagram in your work, without using it to explain or illustrate an argument does not gain much credit.
- Be appropriately rigorous concerning the level of your argument. For example, if you are a second year student, don't provide an answer to an essay based upon first year materials; if you are an honours student, don't base your answer on sub-honours material and so on.
- Your answers should also be appropriately detailed. For example, if you are asked to outline a specific model (or the questions suggests that would be appropriate), your answer should include the level of detail expected by the marker. Lectures notes (plus lab / tutorial materials) and recommended reading should give you a guide.

8. Never plagiarise (avoid Academic Misconduct)

- If the School believes you have plagiarised all or part of an essay, you are likely to face serious consequences. Plagiarism is a form of academic misconduct.
- Plagiarism is when you include material in your essay from another source but try and pass it off as your own. It is a form of academic misconduct.
- All essays go through '*Turnitin*'. This is a program that checks submitted work for plagiarism. Please do not be tempted to use plagiarised material as there is a very good chance you will be found out.
- *Turnitin* works by comparing your work to all ALL the material it can find in its database and on the web. It then provides a percentage 'score' for the essay. This tells the marker the percentage of the essay that can be found elsewhere. Please note there is no 'score' above or below which we assume plagiarism has or hasn't taken place. *Turnitin* is only used as a guide in uncovering plagiarism. Some students get low scores but have obviously plagiarised material. Some students get relatively high scores for legitimate reasons.
- Fully acknowledge all sources you use in your bibliography. You should put all sources (including web sources) that you have utilised in constructing your essay, whether directly referenced or not (see section 10).
- Do not copy material from another source (e.g. a book, article, another student essay, a web-source) and then change and re-arrange words. This is still plagiarism as you are presenting someone else's work as your own. Always use your own words.
- Don't lend copies of essays to anyone unless you are 100% sure they will not copy from it. If someone else copies your essay, the University may view this as academic misconduct on your part.
- Do not copy your own material for another essay. The University also views this as a form of plagiarism. For example, you cannot submit the same piece of work (whether in whole or part) more than one time.

- Above is NOT an exhaustive list of the behaviours that would be viewed by the University as Academic Misconduct. Read the University Academic Misconduct Policy (see your Course Handbook for more information). If you commit Academic Misconduct and claim you did not realise your behaviour would be seen as Academic Misconduct – the University will still find you guilty of Academic Misconduct (i.e. ignorance is not an excuse).

9. Word Limits

- Stick to word limits.
- Word limits include appendices, footnotes, endnotes and notes on figures / diagrams/tables etc., but exclude bibliography, figures / diagrams / tables (excluding text) and equations. (Please note rules are slightly different for dissertations – see your course handbook for details)
- If you exceed a word limit, it is likely that the material beyond the word limit will not be read by the marker. This will reduce the quality of (and the mark for) your work.

10. Referencing and Bibliography

- Notes may be in the form of endnotes or footnotes (footnotes are more commonly used within the economics literature).
- If you wish to refer to someone's work, give references in short form in your text (e.g. "Kreps and Wilson (1982)"), and include a full reference in the bibliography at the end of the essay. Examples of how entries should appear in your bibliography (specifically for a working paper, a book, a journal article, a chapter in an edited book and a website) are given as follows:

References

Nelson, E. and A.J. Schwarz (2007) 'The Impact of Milton Friedman on Modern Monetary Economics: Setting the Record Straight on Paul Krugman's "Who Was Milton Friedman?"', *NBER Working Paper*, No 13456. (downloadable at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w13546>)

Becker, G.S. (1981) *"A Treatise on the Family"*, MA: Harvard University Press

Devereux, M.B. and A. Sutherland (2010) 'Country Portfolio Dynamics', *Journal of Economic Dynamics and Control*, 34, pp 1325-1342.

Shea, G.S. (2009) "Sir George Caswall vs. the Duke of Portland: Financial Contracts and Litigation in the wake of the South Sea Bubble", in Jeremy Atack and Larry Neal (eds.), *The Origins and Development of Financial Markets and Institutions*, pp 32-67, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- You should also put all web sources that you have utilised in constructing your essay, whether directly referenced or not. These should be fully acknowledged as follows:

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk>

http://tutor2u.net/economics/content/topics/externalities/what_are_externalities.htm (tutor2U Website)

11. Some concluding comments

- We are trying to get you to write like economists. Good practice in essay writing differs across disciplines. What constitutes a good writing style in another subject, may not be seen as a good writing style in economics.
- Essay writing is an important transferrable skill. The essays the School sets are designed to 'stretch' you intellectually. This means writing an essay is not necessarily a straightforward exercise. In particular, you may find there is a trade off across the attributes of a good essay. For example, you may find it difficult to fully and rigorously discuss all central issues in an essay within a given word limit. There is a skill (that often comes with practice) in getting the balance right.
- There isn't a magic formula to writing an essay. The above advice essentially allows you to help demonstrate the depth / breadth and quality of your understanding of a topic to the marker. The better your understanding and the better you demonstrate your understanding, the higher your grade.
- To get really high (first class) grades, markers often look for some originality / independence of thought (this applies more strongly to Honours and M.Sc. students). This is something that can only be demonstrated when a student has a really good understanding of the material in an essay. You do not gain credit for writing something

original if it does not help demonstrate a strong understanding of the material (it is very likely to be irrelevant and demonstrate misunderstanding). Focus on understanding the material in your essay. If you really (really) grasp it, you are more likely to be able to think independently!

(LL, PDM)