

FEATURE

Markers don't want to be baffled by reams of regurgitated academic writing – they want concise, well thought-out argument

It is a fact of university life: the night before any major essay is due, the library will be packed, the photocopy machines will be out of paper, the most important reference books will be checked out and you will not be able to get near a computer.

Though not everybody opts for the dreaded “all-nighter” and attempts to cram three weeks of planning, research and construction into 12 hours, most students are bound to panic when faced with writing a major course essay.

In the interests of keeping your blood pressure down and your marks in the top bracket, *FM Campus* sought out professional markers for advice about producing quality essays without having to hook yourself intravenously to a jar of coffee to get through the night.

Planning and preparation

Mohammed Jahed is based at Wits University's Graduate School of Public & Development Management. He is also a member of the Nedbank and Old Mutual

Budget Speech Competition's filter panel and is responsible, along with other assessors, for sorting through scores of entries from undergraduate and post-graduate students.

Jahed and other filter panelists assess the essays submitted to the competition. These are passed on to an adjudication panel that selects the top 20 entrants.

When you are presented with an essay topic, Jahed says it is important to explore the purpose of the question. “[Ask yourself], ‘What am I being asked to do?’,” he says. “Make sure it's clear in your head. Pose yourself questions. Say: ‘What questions can I answer to address the issues presented in the topic?’”

Jahed gives the example of an economics essay topic that asks students to examine the concept of unemployment. The first step, he says, is to ask yourself key questions about unemployment. They could include the question: “What is unemployment according to economic theory?” and “What methods can be used to tackle unemployment?”

With these questions in mind – and perhaps even included in your essay's introduction so the marker has a clear idea of your focus and methodology – you can begin a literature review.

The right research

“Base your research on the questions you have asked,” says Jahed. “Focus and narrow your research down to those questions. You must isolate the focus area – you can't research everything.”

Many students are guilty of information overload in their research and in their final written essay. By identifying key questions, you are able to avoid doing 20 or 30 readings and, most importantly, you are able to avoid regurgitating unnecessary readings in an overly long and unfocused essay.

“You should read five to 10 articles maximum,” Jahed advises. “You can do this once you have focus.”

Another member of the Budget Speech Competition's filter panel, Wilmien Smith of the Central University of Technology in the Free State, suggests a novel way of collecting sources in preparation for writing your essay: “Take a book relevant to the topic – do not read it in its entirety – consult the contents and select the section relevant to the topic under discussion. Do not

read it. Photostat the section. Consult the next book and do the same.

“Put these articles in a file, but be careful to photostat the cover page as well as the page where the year and place of publication can be found. Staple them together. Do this until you have at least six sources.”

Once you have compiled this make-shift book of sources, you can start reading about the topic. Go through all of the sources you have photocopied once. Then consult them again.

“The second time you read through all of your sources, you have to start making headings and subheadings, deciding what sections your work should contain to properly explain or address the topic.”

By doing this, you will be able to better identify what aspects should be dealt with in answering the question.

The art of writing

Thorough research is just one aspect of producing a fantastic essay. For many students, it is the actual essay construction that poses the biggest challenge.

Jahed says: “The hallmark of an excellent essay is logical structure. I want to know [when marking an essay], does it follow a logical sequence?”

It is important, Jahed says, to clearly

identify the purpose of your essay and explain to the reader or marker how you will address the problem or problems.

This should all be laid out at the very beginning of your essay, giving the marker a chance to understand what your writing process will be.

Quite simply, Jahed says, he looks for four key areas when marking an essay: first, the underlying theory. Then move to a critique that addresses the positive and negative aspects of, for example, unemployment. After that, move to your own view of the issue and offer suggestions for how to address it. Finally, present your own conclusion.

All of this, he says, must be presented in conjunction with other people's views and discussions around the essay topic.

It is important to present your understanding of what other people are saying about an issue and to offer a good, solid critique of their opinions.

Practice makes perfect

Chrissie Boughey, the head of Rhodes University's Academic Development Centre, believes that though essay-writing skills are discipline specific – the tools you apply to writing an English essay differ from those you use for a zoology essay, for example – academic knowledge is universal.

“When students come to university, they don't come to ‘get’ knowledge, but rather to learn how to build or make academic knowledge,” Boughey says.

She recommends constantly working at your essay-writing, engaging in what is known as “pre-writing”. You can do this by reading journals and documenting what you have read and what you thought of them, or by keeping a journal about your academic reading.

“Writing for yourself means you don't have to use academic language – you can get control of ideas in the language you are comfortable with. Really bad essays try to use academic language, but are meaningless. It is better not to try to use the sophisticated academic stuff – most academics would rather have something good said simply than non-sense masked in academic language that does not make sense.”

Smith says: “After writing the complete essay, start proofreading. A second eye picks up what the first eye misses. Get a friend to check the relevance [of your arguments] to the topic first.”

She also suggests reading the essay aloud and getting another person to check for typing errors.

All right, now unhook yourself from that coffee IV and get writing – smartly.

Natasha Joseph

STUDIES

Essay writing made easy

“Writing for yourself means you don't have to use academic language – you can get control of ideas in the language you are comfortable with. Really bad essays try to use academic language, but are meaningless”