

# *Above Average Essay Writing*



*Heather E. Ryndaws*

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Above Average Series*

# Above Average Essay Writing

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## *Foreword*

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I didn't really learn how to write properly until **after** I'd finished both school and a university degree course. I went on to do a doctorate, and then I really **had to** learn **how** to write!

My supervisor, an uncommonly modest man, would patiently edit my long-winded and flowery prose. He'd mildly suggest I made "just a few little changes, nothing major really", as he reworded large parts of my thesis. I carefully studied how this early work had been altered and thereby learnt how to improve my style. When the first scientific papers we wrote received glowing comments about the standard of the writing I was secretly very proud. Since then I've published various works and now **consider writing to be one of the most enjoyable tasks** I do.

These days I regularly find myself in the position of having to assess the written work of students, and occasionally of colleagues. While I'm always delighted to read a well written piece, it seems a pity that otherwise intelligent people often let themselves down by their poor

standard of writing. I've known people who, even though they've already attained high level academic qualifications, still can't write well. This can become a nuisance, both to them and work-mates who have to compensate for them!

I decided to try and help some of my students by teaching them about essay writing in some of their tutorials. Some time later I was encouraged to write this guide, in the hope of helping more people who need to improve their essay writing skills.

I hope that once you've mastered the basics you'll find writing **fun**, as I do.

I wish you all the best!

*Heather E. Ryndaws,  
April 2004.*

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## *Introduction*

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This guide takes you through the process of essay writing. It gives guidance on essay planning, research, writing and editing. It shows you how an essay should, and should not, be structured. There is also some advice on the use of word-processors and the writing of exam essays. A summary of the most important points is provided as an aide memoir.

This isn't a course on grammar or spelling. If you're struggling with these you should seek help elsewhere.

Although general advice is given on research and finding information, you may need specific help if you plan to use computer or other databases for this. Generally speaking databases are easy to use. These days they are often available at libraries, where the staff can quickly show you what to do, and help you to obtain any passwords necessary.

This guide was written bearing in mind experiences gathered over several years of both writing and teaching. During that time I've

read and marked countless student essays. In my experience most degree level students believe they know what essays are, and how to write them. Nevertheless they typically make and remake various particular errors. I've tried to point out the most common mistakes, so that you might avoid them. However, when it comes down to it no-one can write your essays but you. Although the technique of essay writing can be taught you can't expect to become good at it without some practice. The more you practice the better your essays will become, and the more you'll enjoy writing them.

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### *The stages of essay writing*

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There are 3 basic stages of essay writing: **preparing to write, writing and editing**. Each of these involves various sub-stages, with particular tasks to do and methods for doing them. All of the stages are important if you want to write essays that will be informative and enjoyable to read.

Students often make the mistake of omitting one or more of the stages or sub-stages when

they write their essays. Some underestimate the need for careful preparation, while others misjudge just how much time such preparation can take. Some heave a sigh of relief at the moment the last word is written, and then rush off to give unedited essays to their tutors. Typically these students produce essays below a standard of which they are capable.

You might typically expect to spend as much or even more time preparing to write your essay as actually writing. The time spent editing will depend on your skill level and how complicated your essay is. Usually the more sources of information you have to include in your essay the more difficult it will be to get it all in a logical order with which you are satisfied, and so the more editing you might expect to have to do. Furthermore if you spend more time planning an essay you might hope to spend correspondingly less time editing, but it doesn't always work out that way.

Don't be discouraged if you find yourself rearranging substantial chunks of your essay to improve its coherence and readability – many professional writers do the same. There does,

however, inevitably come a time when the profit gained from fine-tuning your masterpiece must be balanced against that you might obtain from starting on your next assignment, revising or taking a well earned rest!

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## *Preparation*

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The importance of preparation should not be under-estimated: it might well take up a substantial part of the time you spend on your essays. There are various sub-stages including (1) analysing the task, (2) making a plan and (3) research. For convenience I will deal with each of the stages in turn. In reality though making a plan is something you'll probably start before your research and modify as your research progresses, depending on what you already know and what you learn.

### *(1) Analysing the Task*

Before writing you should know what's expected of you, or what you wish to write. If your teacher gives you an essay title read it carefully and

decide exactly what's wanted. Underlining keywords can help you understand what's required. However, if you're at all unsure ask the teacher or lecturer as soon as possible, and before going any further.

You may have been told to think of a title of your choice within a particular theme or subject area. If so it's a good idea to check your favoured title with your teacher as soon as you've chosen it. I sometimes set students assignments in this fashion and am usually able to advise them if they've picked a difficult topic, either because of conceptually difficult subject matter or because there's little published on their chosen subject. In addition I try to help to reword titles if they're a little ambiguous, or don't quite convey what the student has in mind. I'm sure your teacher would be happier to advise you beforehand, rather than let you struggle over an essay that might not make particularly good reading when you've finished.

## *(2) Making a plan*

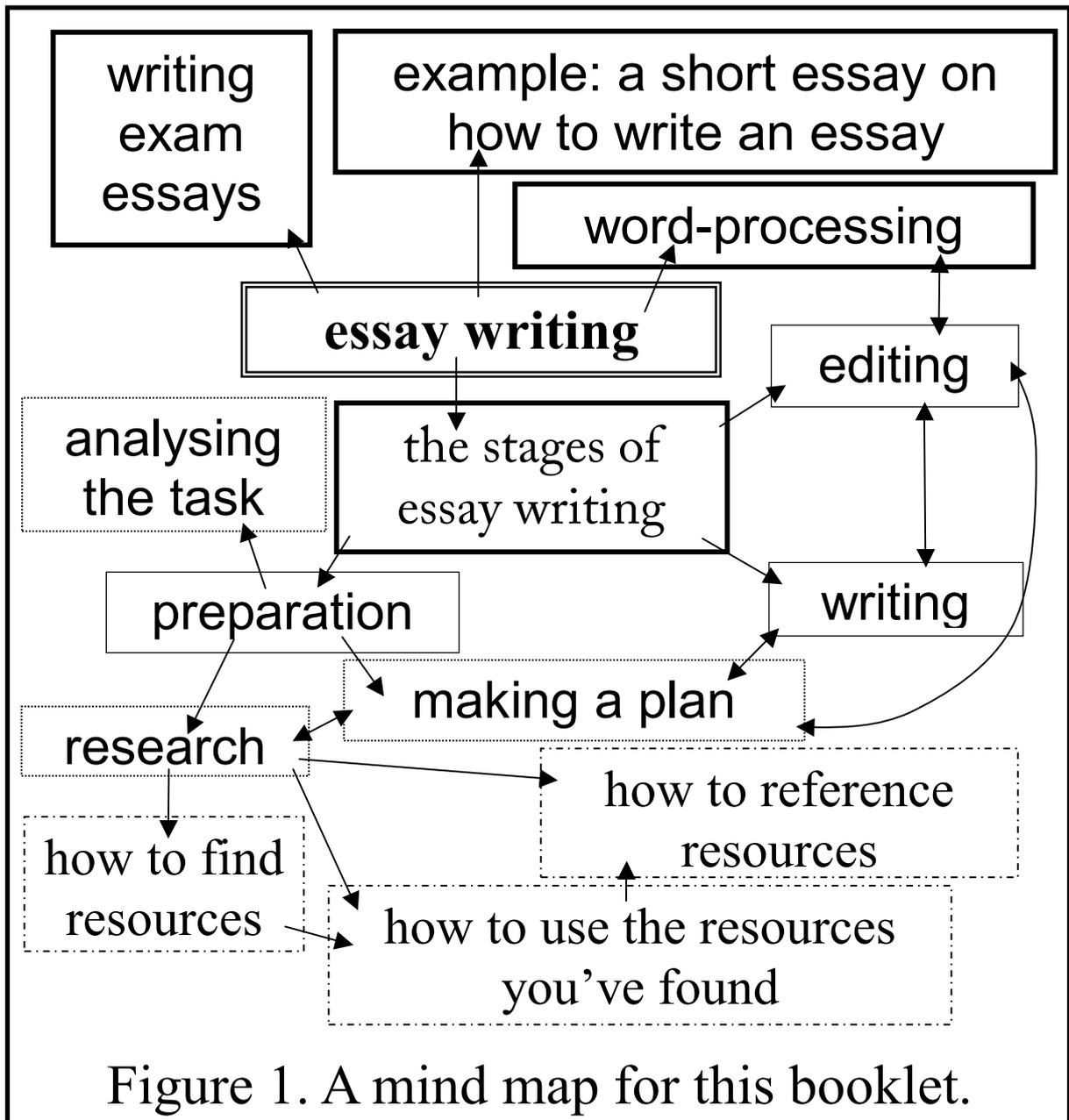
A plan is vital to ensure that your essay is constructed in a logical and coherent manner.

It'll help you make your essay well-ordered and fluent. It's also something you can use when you've written your essay, to check that you haven't omitted anything important for example.

Your plan doesn't have to be linear, although it helps if it ends up in that form. For a start you could make what's called a "mind map": write the main subject in the middle of a large sheet of paper and then write sub-topics in an array encircling it. From each sub-topic create branches for sub-sub-topics and examples, as you think of them, perhaps later noting the key references beside each. Arrows can indicate which topics are related to which, and how. The advantage of this kind of map is that it helps you to think about what should go in your essay, and to realize what relates to what. You'll also be more easily able to identify where the gaps in your knowledge are. A mind map for this booklet is shown as an illustration in figure 1.

Another planning technique similar to mind mapping is that of using cards, each indicating a sub-topic, example or some other small part that'll be included in the essay. The cards can be arranged by spreading them out on the floor

or a table. This method has the added advantage of allowing you to “edit” your plan by adding, subtracting and moving cards about.



Unless you’ve a really clear idea of what you’re

going to write your plan will probably evolve over time. Start off with rough plan that broadly defines which areas you'll write about, and in what order. This can be expanded and refined as your research progresses.

The way your essay is ordered is to some extent a matter for personal preference. I often find that other people would order things differently to me, even when they're writing about essentially the same thing. This doesn't worry me as there's usually more than one way to do deal with the same subject material, with "my" way not necessarily being better or worse than the others. The main thing is that your essay shouldn't be "jerky": one thing should smoothly lead on to another without startling the reader. You should avoid abrupt changes between subjects, example or arguments.

As well as being ordered your essay should also be balanced. Different parts should take up different amounts of space according their importance. You shouldn't necessarily expend lots of ink on a particular subject just because you've found a lot of information on it. Instead look for information on all the important parts

and then be choosy about what you include. Indicate on your plan the relative importance of each point and roughly what proportion of your essay will be taken up by it. If you have a word limit then translate the proportions into an approximate number of words.

Balance is particularly important if you're writing a multi-part essay. For example if you've been asked "How is modern genetic technology used in medicine? What are the moral issues associated with its use?" then an essay that mostly describes how genetic technology is used to diagnose a particular disease wouldn't be sufficient. Even if it contained lots of up to the minute details about exactly how and why the technology is used your essay wouldn't be balanced and would most probably be awarded a low mark. In this case a less in depth survey of various techniques might be expected **along with** a discussion of the ethical issues connected with using that technology. Unless otherwise indicated you might well expect the two parts of the essay to carry equal weighting (and marks). It follows that addressing only one part would earn you at most only half the marks, even if you made a really good job of it.

### *(3) Research*

Research involves finding, reading and organising **relevant** information. I always spend time on this task, perhaps 30-60% of the total time I spend on the whole project, depending on what material I already have and how much material has to be taken into account.

Always start your research as early as possible. If you have to use an inter-library loan service it can take from a few days to two or three weeks to receive books or photocopies once you've requested them. If you don't make your requests early enough you might get caught out, with information arriving for you after your essay deadline (as has happened to some students I've known). In addition you should consider how many other students will be writing this essay at the same time as you. If there are a few recommended texts you can bet they'll be out on loan as the essay deadline approaches! What's more, if you are able to take them from the library, they may be quickly recalled if the library is suddenly deluged with other requests for the same books. So start your research early, and if necessary photocopy

the most important parts to look at later.

Different types of essay require you to use different kinds of information sources. **Make sure you know what kinds of resources you're expected to use.** Broadly speaking there are two possibilities.

Firstly there are essays requiring you to look at textbooks and non-original research and reports. These are called **secondary sources** since the authors are explaining or reporting on research or incidences that they haven't done or witnessed for themselves, i.e. secondary sources are not first-hand accounts. Most essays for school, college and first year undergraduate studies will require study from textbooks and other specialist books. Other forms of non-original research and reports include articles from certain types of magazine, such as popular science, history or economics magazines. In addition you might use the media, probably including the internet.

Secondly there are essays requiring you to document and/or comment on original research and reports, which will probably be published in

specialist journals. Reports of original research and first-hand accounts are called **primary sources**. Essays for second and third year undergraduate students, and for postgraduate students, will often involve assimilating and synthesising information from primary sources. Essays for vocational courses might require students to look up similar information, in trade journals, for example.

If you have to use primary sources there's one kind of secondary resource – **the review** – that can be particularly useful to you. Reviews assimilate, evaluate and comment on original research in a specific (usually quite narrow) field. They're often limited to reviewing research done within a particular time-span, typically concentrating on the most recent.

Reviews can be very useful in helping you to identify the scope of a subject, including what's especially important, and what developments have occurred. They're also an excellent source of references for important papers in the field. For those using primary resources reviews are a recommended starting place, particularly if you're researching something of which you've

limited knowledge and experience.

Once you know what kind of reading material you're expected to use you need to find, use and reference an appropriate amount of it. This amount will depend on the scope and level of your essay. It'll also depend on how much has been published in that particular subject area, and perhaps how much has been published recently (or maybe historically). This might be something you can only establish after a careful and thorough literature search.

*(i) How to find resources*

Although you might have a small "library" of your own the chances are that you'll need to visit at least one library during your research. Usually it's best to try and find out what you're looking for first. Browsing is OK if you've plenty of time, or if you just want a few textbooks on a particular subject. If you need to find original papers or other specialist references it's much more efficient to identify what you want, and take a list with you.

There are various ways of identifying the best papers to look at. Some libraries have microfiche or printed catalogues, but usually the easiest way is use a computer database. These are often available in libraries and other places of study. If you've an online computer you may be able to access suitable databases at home. If you're unfamiliar with the technology ask a teacher – it's not difficult when you know how.

When searching for literature I usually start by looking up particular authors. If, however, you don't know which are the relevant researchers in your field of interest you're probably better off using a subject index or **keyword search**. Many on-line databases will let you see summaries of particular articles, allowing you to decide in advance whether they'll be worth reading (and possibly ordering). Some journals can now be viewed on-line. Sometimes free viewing is allowed, especially of older editions. If not it's worth checking if your place of study or work, or your library, has a subscription to any on-line journals you might need.

Once you've found a few references look to see if the authors have given any useful references

that you might use. If you can find a relevant review then it's bound to cite references for papers of interest to you. In addition check to see if the same authors have written other papers on the same subject. In this way you can often create a "snowball effect", quickly finding many relevant references.

It's worth noting here that authors often write quite similar articles at different times and/or for different sources. In this case it may be that you'll only want to read the most recent and up-to-date article. You should check carefully though as articles with similar titles might be of substantially different lengths, when you might want to consider the scope and depth of coverage as well as their timeliness.

An hour or so working on a database can often be a very good way of deciding exactly which references you want. If you use a library database there'll probably be a library classification number given for each reference. This will help you to locate the shelves that the books or journals you need are on, and will probably indicate where on the shelves to look for them. If some of them are not in the library

the database will probably tell you this too, and may allow you to request an inter-library loan on-line (but check first how much this will cost and how long the material will take to arrive).

When you're trying to decide if you want to use a particular reference ask yourself the following:

- **When was it published?** Particularly with fast moving subjects, such as technological and scientific subjects, you may need the most up-to-date stuff you can get. If on the other hand you're writing an historical piece you may be looking for work from a particular time period.
- **Who's the author? Are they well known in the field, or otherwise well qualified to write what they have written?** This is an especially important consideration if you use material taken from the internet where virtually anyone can publish anything on anything!
- **Who's it written for?** Has it been written specifically for and by researchers, for example? **Will it be at both a level you can understand and at a level appropriate for the course (and year of course) that you're**

**studying for?** Look to see if it is an introductory or advanced text (it may well say on the jacket or at the beginning of a book). If there's a glossary you might look to see how technical the vocabulary looks. You should also read the summary (sometimes called an abstract), and perhaps the introduction.

• **Does it contain relevant information?**

Consider whether you've time to read information of only marginal relevance. If you don't then only pick books and articles that are highly relevant to your essay, even if the others do look interesting! To assess the relevance of a book or article you might read the introduction, summary or conclusion, as well as skimming through the text and looking at the contents pages and/or index. You could also have a list of questions you need to address, or areas you need to cover. Ask yourself if each reference contributes significantly to your understanding of one or more of these questions or topics. Check to see what examples have been used. If you are choosing between textbooks see which have the greatest coverage of relevant material, and which you find clearest.

• **Is there a reference list, bibliography or suggestions for further reading?** Even if you decide that what you have isn't quite what you want there may be leads to other sources of information. On the other hand if it's ideal then the references are most probably useful too.

*(ii) How to use resources*

By this stage you'll have a stack of relevant reading material – and it probably looks rather awesome! So what on earth do you do next?

You have to read them, but that doesn't mean sitting down in the morning and reading until you finish the last sentence! Unless you've got quite a small amount of reading material you probably couldn't manage this anyway. If you have lots of reading material then you probably won't remember where you read what. Instead proceed in the following way:

1. Using your plan identify which books and papers relate to which parts of your essay. Put them in piles accordingly. Have another pile for general references if necessary.

2. Start work on one section (pile) and ignore your other references for now.
3. Pick out the most general references – probably textbooks and/or reviews – and deal with these first.
4. “Skip-read”, picking out the most relevant parts to read in detail. Make notes from these parts. If you’ve a photocopy you might emphasise useful parts with a highlighting pen (*never* mark borrowed books).
5. You don’t necessarily want to read all of one paper or book chapter followed by all of the next, even within sections. If two papers use the same example or deal with the same information then read these together. They will never be exactly the same and you’ll be able to build up a more complete picture by using both sources, even if you later only include some of the information in your essay.
6. At this stage you should start to write about the particular section you’ve chosen to work on (it doesn’t have to be the first part of your essay). You must also do one extremely important thing: **make a record of the**

**references you are using.** If you leave this stage until the end you'll find it tedious and difficult, and it'll take much longer than if you do it now. It's most efficient to combine steps 5 and 6, until you've written something about the particular part of your essay, and have recorded the appropriate references.

7. Move on to another part of your essay, and the next pile of reading material.

*(iii) How to reference resources*

**All sources of information used must be identified in the essay and fully referenced in a section at the end.** Make sure any quotes you use are relevant and add something to your essay. Unless they are exceptionally insightful or controversial it's better to only quote key people in the field. Don't use quotes to avoid writing something for yourself, and always credit the original author for any quotes you do use.

**It's essential that you don't copy sentences as if they're your own.** This is a serious offence called **plagiarism**. If you're caught plagiarising you'll at best lose marks. At worst you might get expelled.

**It's possible to rewrite anything in your own style, and possibly use novel examples to illustrate the point.** Such rewriting will help you develop your own style and improve your overall written ability. For the sake of a few moments thought it's not worth the risk of plagiarising!

Don't assume that your tutor will not notice if you plagiarise the odd sentence or two. He or she will know much of the work published in the field and will probably spot anything you "borrow". In addition it's not too difficult to spot the sudden changes in writing style that tend to accompany plagiarism. You should also keep in mind that it's easy to find out if something has been plagiarised from a web-site. Powerful search engines are available on most computers, and dedicated plagiarism detection software is now being used at many academic establishments. **Never plagiarise, and always reference your work properly.**

There are various ways to reference within an essay, according to how sources are used. To illustrate this we'll consider a fictitious example

with invented characters writing imagined “facts” in imaginary books and journals.

Let’s suppose you are writing an essay about the history of the Syrian hamster and a researcher called Harry Hamstern has written a ground-breaking paper about the recent discovery of golden hamsters in Syria (in reality some think they may be extinct there). This being such a momentous piece of news you must of course include it in your essay. You also want to mention the last discovery of hamsters in Syria reported in the early 1970s by Professor Roy Rodentia and his research assistant Justin Case, along with subsequent fruitless hamster hunting attempts by Charlie Critter. Part of your essay might look like this:

“Harry Hamstern (2001b) of the University of Aleppo, Syria, has recently discovered golden hamsters living in the wild, in the deserts of Syria. The hamsters were thought to have gone extinct after the last wild hamsters were found there in the early 1970’s (Rodentia and Case, 1973). Charlie Critter, a hamster expert from the US, commented that “Hamsters were thought to have gone extinct almost 30 years ago. Several

hamster hunting expeditions have been carried out since then but no hamsters were ever found. Harry's find is very exciting! We now have to carefully consider how we might help to conserve this animal in the wild." (Personal communication, June 2001)."

You can see I've used 3 different kinds of referencing. In the first I've said who discovered hamsters recently (Harry Hamstern). The (2001b) refers to the second of two or more publications by Harry Hamstern in 2001, which have been referred to in the essay. If we'd only referenced one 2001 paper by this author then no letter would have been used, even if Harry had published more papers in that year. A year would always be given, even if Harry Hamstern had only written one paper ever. This is so other people can find and read the paper if they wish.

The second reference is to an article by Roy Rodentia and Justin Case, published in 1973. Only the surnames and publication year are given. This is a common way of referencing. If more than two people had written the article then the reference would've been "(Rodentia *et al*, 1973)". The "*et al*" means "and others" and is

almost always written in italic script.

The third reference is to a quote by Charlie Critter. In this case Charlie was asked for a comment, which he kindly supplied, hence the reference to “personal communication”. The time the comment was made is also indicated.

Let’s suppose that you also find a web-site by Valerie Varmint in which the research methods of Charlie Critter are criticised. You may want to cite this in your essay:

“Varmint (2001) criticised the earlier research of Critter, saying that the sampling methods were insufficient. He asserts that that Critter couldn’t have expected to discover any wild hamsters in Syria, given the very short duration of each expedition, and the sampling methods used. ...”

Once you’ve referenced in the text you’ll need a section after the end of your essay to give more complete details of where your information sources were published (the “references” section). The conventions for referencing vary but all include the authors surnames, with either their first names or initials, the publication year (sometimes in brackets), and the source of the

information and publisher. Usually the title is given, but not always (again some journals omit titles to save space). Ask your teacher if there's a preferred style of referencing that you're expected to stick to.

One particular style is shown for the example discussed above. The references are arranged in alphabetical order of the surnames of the first quoted authors, which is perhaps the most usual convention. When this system is used references to work by the same author or authors occur in chronological order, with letters to distinguish papers published in the same year. Here the first line of each reference is formatted to be hanging, although sometimes the first lines may be indented or flush. Sometimes references are numbered, but I suggest you don't do this unless you're specifically told to (discussed later). It isn't usual to leave a blank line between references.

## **References**

- Critter, C. 2001. Personal communication.
- Hamstern, H. 2001a. A history of the Syrian Hamster. London, Hamster Press.
- Hamstern, H. 2001b. The re-discovery of

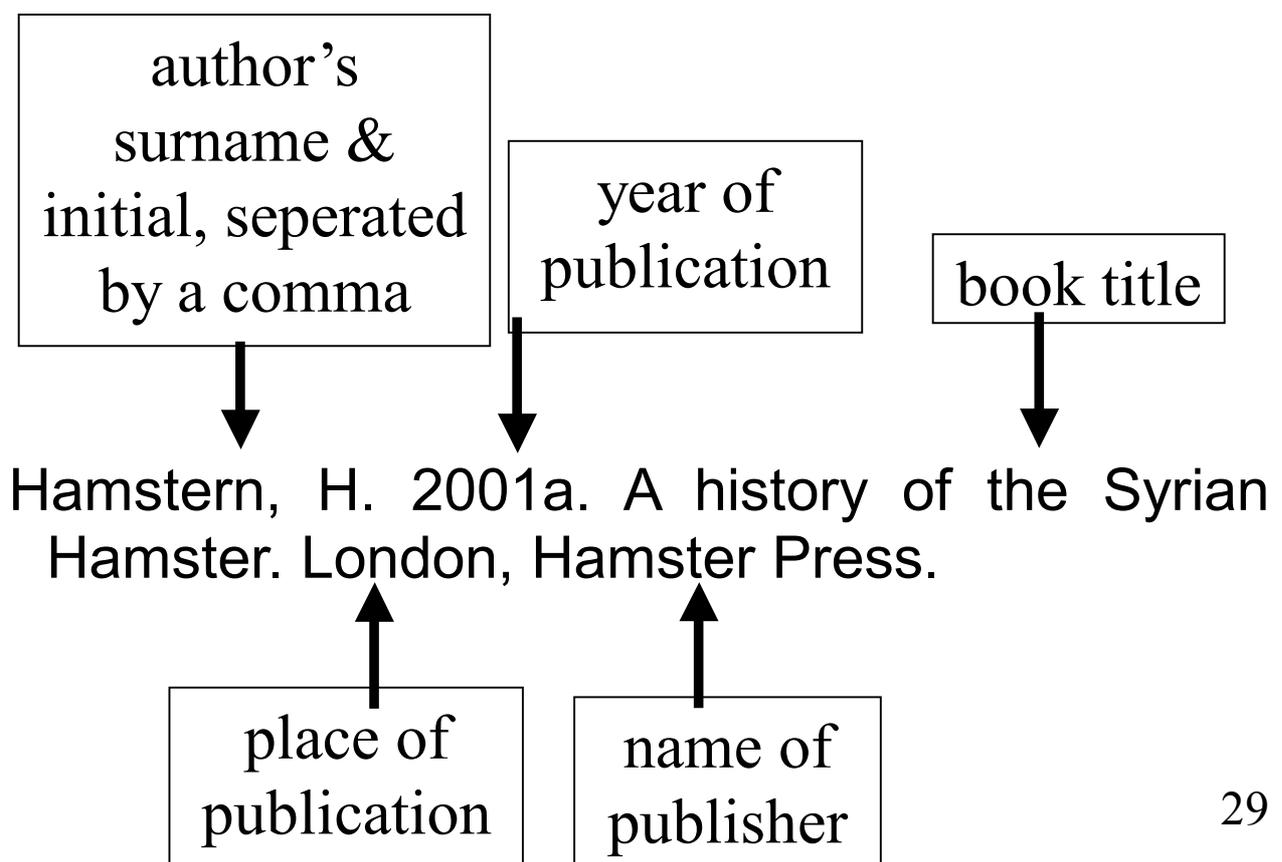
*Mesocricetus auratus* in Syria. *Journal of Rodent Conservation* **560**, 211-215.

Rodentia, R. and Case, J. 1973. 'A comparison of domestic and wild Syrian hamsters' in Hamstern, H and Critter, C (eds.) *Rodent Genetics*. New York, Academic Writings.

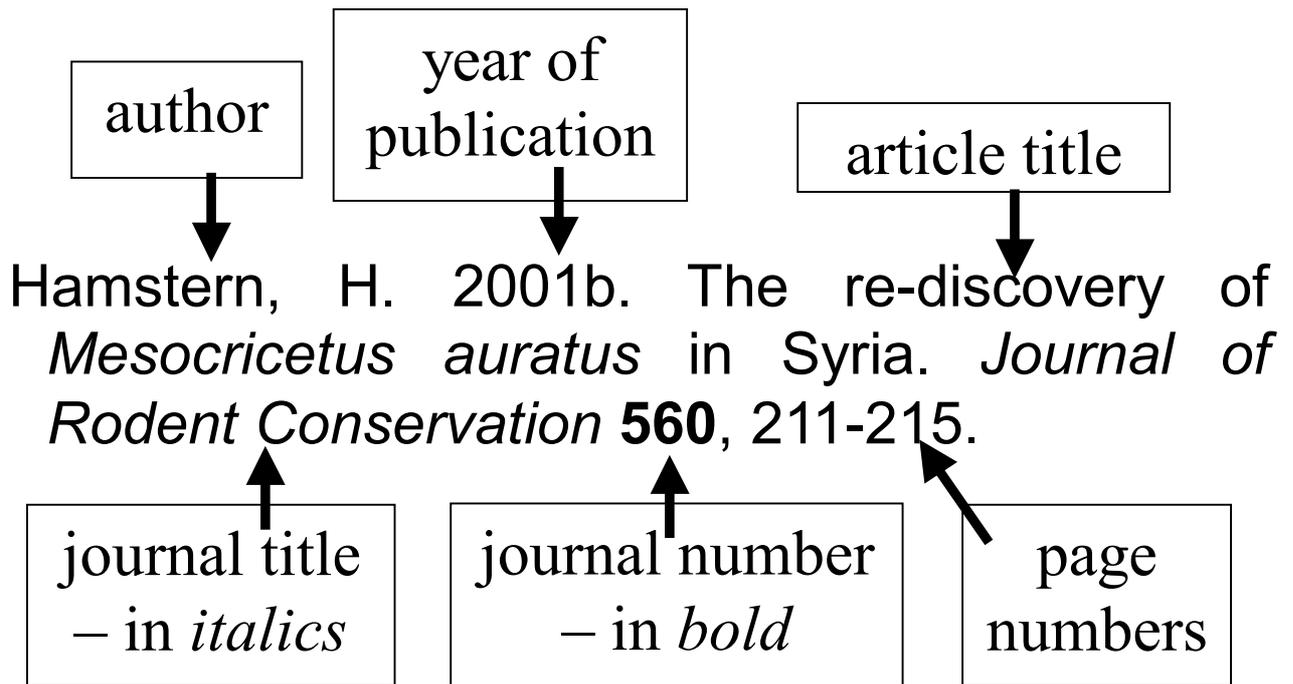
Varmint, V. 2001. Are Syrian hamsters really extinct in the wild? University of Life. At <http://www.uol.ac.uk/varmint/index.htm> [Accessed 3.6.2001]

Each reference relates to a different kind of information source. The first is discussed above. We'll now consider the others in detail.

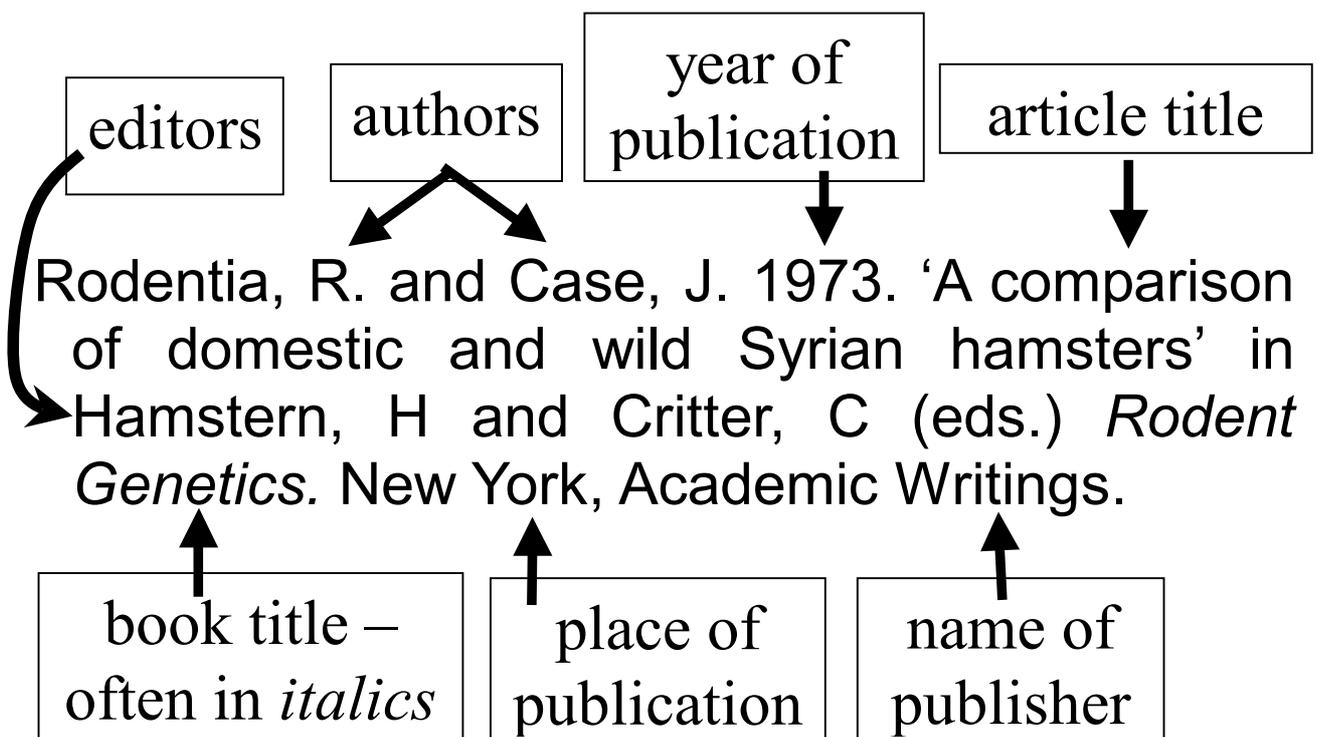
**The second reference is to a book:**



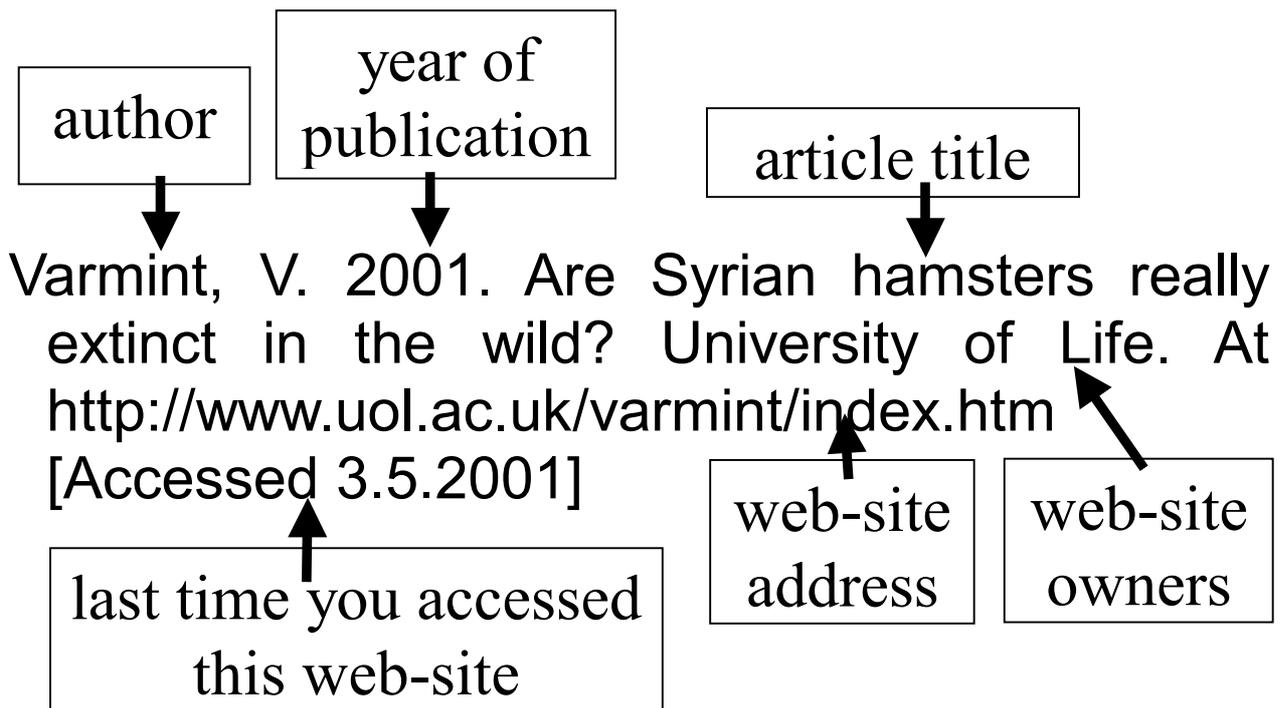
## The third reference is to a journal article:



## The fourth reference is to an article (or chapter) in an edited book:



## The fifth reference is to an internet article:



If no publication date is given then say so, for example:

Varmint, V. (no date). Are Syrian hamsters really extinct in the wild? University of Life. At <http://www.uol.ac.uk/varmint/index.htm> [Accessed 3.6.2001]

Sometimes the name and year referencing system in the text is replaced by numbers, either super-scripted or given in (often square) brackets. I suggest you don't use such a system unless you are specifically asked to. It

makes editing your essay unnecessarily difficult and annoying. If you want to change the order of anything you might well have to re-number all your references. You might have to do this several times. Unless you have special software to do this job for you it's not fun! In addition it's easy to make errors using this system. Most journals that use this system do so chiefly as a space saving measure.

If you do have to number your references then I suggest you use the system of using names and years until you've finished writing and editing. Only when you're completely satisfied that you'll not be moving, adding or removing any references should you number them, reordering the references section to match. Be careful not to reference one source twice (i.e. give it two numbers and/or replicate it's details in the references section).

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## *Writing*

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**An essay should consist of an introduction, a main body (or middle) and a conclusion. There should be no subtitles, an essay being a**

**continuous piece of prose.** We'll now consider each of the parts of an essay in detail.

### *(1) Introduction*

The **introduction** of an essay is a paragraph in which **the reader is told what the essay is about**, and what kind of information it'll contain. A good essay plan is very useful for constructing an introduction. It helps you focus on what the themes of your essay are. "Attention grabbers" can be included in the introduction ***as long as they indicate what the essay is about.*** An example for the hamster essay might look like this:

“Until recently the Syrian hamster was thought to be extinct in the wild. It's now been re-discovered to science after almost 30 years. This essay considers the history of the Syrian hamster from it's initial discovery and description in 1843. The early use of the hamster as a laboratory animal is described, along with how this led to the domestication of the hamster as a pet. The origins of domesticated hamsters are examined, along

with the effects of them all having descended from only three related individuals. The genetic and physical changes that have occurred in domesticated animals are discussed in relation to the original wild type animals. Finally the potential future of Syrian hamsters is considered, both in the wild and as pets.”

In this example the first two sentences are the “attention grabber” (but remember it’s a fictitious example!).

## *(2) Main body*

**The main body** of an essay should be written using paragraphs, each of which conveys one main idea, and perhaps gives examples. Each subject area or argument should be discussed in one or a few paragraphs, depending on the length and complexity of the essay.

Following a plan can help in structuring, and for ensuring that only relevant information is included - and that nothing is forgotten. This is the point where you link together and tidy up the writing you did when you were also researching.

You may need to go back to some of the reading material again, and you'll be glad you referenced everything properly! At this point you should remove any sub-headings (or plan headings) you might've been using up to now. An essay is a piece of continuous prose and should not be broken up under sub-headings.

The sentence structure of each paragraph is similar to the paragraph structure of the essay. First an introductory sentence indicates what the paragraph is about. Next a main body contains further information and ideas, and may give examples. Finally a concluding sentence leads the reader to the next paragraph.

Each sentence should be concise and convey a single idea. A mixture of short and long sentences can be used, but using too many long sentences is not a good idea (especially for the novice). Long sentences are more difficult to construct properly. It's also often easier to make a point clear by using shorter sentences, which tend to be easier to read.

Try not to repeat words or phrases several times in the same paragraph, if you can avoid it.

If necessary reword one or more sentences that contain the repeats. Use a thesaurus to find alternative words that mean the same thing. If you use a word-processor see if it has an in-built thesaurus, and if it does learn to use it!

Always try to think about your essay from the point of view of a reader. If you're bored with what you're writing then a reader would probably feel the same way! Try to find interesting examples to illustrate your main points. Aim to seamlessly condense and combine the most relevant, important and interesting findings of your research. A reader should be able to glide painlessly through your essay without struggling to understand what you've written, or why you've written it. The order in which you've arranged your information should seem logical, and help lead the reader, as naturally as possible, to your conclusions.

### *(3) Conclusion*

The **conclusion** of an essay should summarise the main points. **No new material should be included** and **examples shouldn't be given.**

An overall concluding opinion can be given, particularly when the essay is a discursive piece or involves critical evaluation. However this is not the place to reargue your opinion: it should already be clear why and how you came to your point of view. If it's not clear you need to re-write the essay's main body to make it clear.

#### *(4) Writing style*

The style of your writing should be tailored to the type of essay you're writing, but unless you're doing a "journalistic piece" you're likely to be expected to write formally. For formal writing you should use impersonal language and not use slang or colloquial (conversational) expressions. When writing my Ph.D. it took my supervisor a long time to work out that the word "unyet" should have actually been written as "and yet"! That's how it's said in the part of the fens from where I come - but no one else had a clue what I'd written! Others, including your teacher, will most probably not understand dialect that you consider commonplace.

When writing formally don't address your

readers directly (as I've been doing here), and (mostly) don't refer to yourself specifically. You may refer to the authors of any books or research papers you've been reading (see the referencing section to see how to do this properly). The only exception is if you have to critically evaluate various points of view or conflicting research. Then it seems unnatural to always refer to your own views in the impersonal (although it's possible by using phrases such as "The evidence suggests..." and words like "apparently"). Using impersonal forms then can tend to weaken the strength of your assertions: "Given the evidence it appears that..." just doesn't pack the same punch as "In my opinion...". In this case I would definitely use the personal form (if you're in doubt ask).

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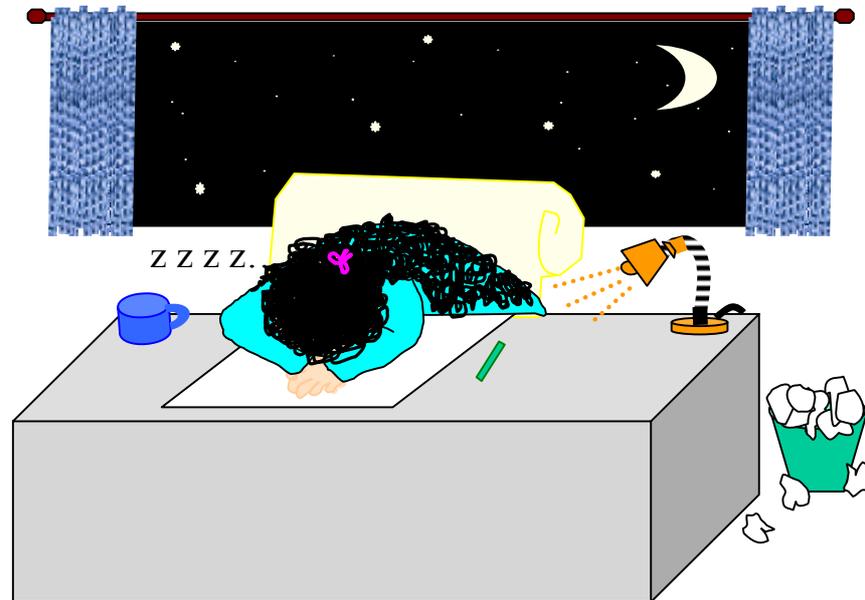
## *Editing*

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**Never submit the first draft of an essay for assessment.** Always be read it through and edit it. Even expert and professional writers edit their work, often several times.

**Do your editing after a break.** You'll be less

tired, and more likely to spot mistakes and identify changes that need to be made.



When editing ask yourself the following questions and take action as indicated:

- **Does your essay really cover the issues it's meant to? Look for omissions, and also for text that's not to the point, or has been repeated.** Be ruthless - if it doesn't contribute significantly to the subject of the essay then cut it out. Remember that most teachers can spot waffle a mile off - and they don't want to read it!
- **Do all the sentences really make sense? Have you really said exactly what you mean?** If you're unsure about some part of your

essay then ask a friend to read that bit. If it's clear to them without any further explanations from you then fine, otherwise you should try a bit of re-wording. **You can only write clearly about something if you understand it clearly.** So if part of your essay looks a muddle you might need to go back to your texts, and then try again. You might even need to find an additional source of information that more clearly explains what you don't understand.

- **Are the paragraphs and sentences arranged in a logical sequence?** Use your plan to help you, but don't be afraid to change it if that now seems the sensible thing to do. Word processors can greatly simplify the ordering of text since sections can be easily moved around. They are also a great asset if your spelling or handwriting isn't very good!

- **Have you kept within the word limits set for your essay?** Not keeping to a word limit can lose you marks. Check how rigid your word limit is, e.g. some teachers will allow students to be within 5 or 10 percent of the word limit. You may have to state the number of words at the end of your essay, or even submit your essay electronically so that the teacher can check on

the word count for him or herself. Remember that teachers are generally reasonably good judges of word counts. They will know if you try to pass off 3000 words as 5000 words!

If your essay's too short consider adding examples or exploring some subjects in more detail. Think carefully about keeping your essay balanced when you make additions.

If your essay's too long try rewording sentences and paragraphs to make them shorter. With practice you should be able to cut out quite a lot of words without substantially altering the sense or information content of your essay. In fact it's often the case that essays edited in this way will be easier and more enjoyable to read. Only cut out information as a last resort, or if you've clearly "wandered off" the topic. The first thing you might be able to cut is the amount of detail given about particular examples.

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### *Word-processing*

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Word processed essays look neatly presented. They're also easier to edit, and so you should

be able to make them read more smoothly.

If you'll be expected to word process then you should word-process all your essays (and other written assignments) **from the start**. This way you'll more quickly become proficient with the keyboard (if you aren't already). Particularly if you're doing a course where you'll eventually have to do a project (or other long piece of "written" work) you should get used to word-processing as soon as possible. At first you may have to plan and make notes on paper. You might also have to print a draft so that you can get an overview of the whole essay, and do some initial editing on it. After practise you may find you can do everything on the computer.

Check if there are any guidelines for word-processing essays. In general 12-point type is used, probably in Times New Roman or Arial font. Be wary of using fancy fonts since some printers don't print them out properly. It's best to stick to the standard or "true type" fonts and forget the others. There may be guidelines about margin sizes and line spacing (i.e. whether the lines should be single spaced, double-spaced, or a space and a half apart).

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## *Writing exam essays*

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If you have to write essays in examinations you should practice as part of your revision.

Listen out for your teacher or lecturer giving clues about what will be in your exam, subtle or otherwise! You should also make sure you have copies of past exam papers, and of specimen papers or questions if these are available (they may be all that's available if the course is new). If you're stuck then ask your teachers where to get hold of papers or questions. They would prefer you to ask than to do badly in the exams (in my experience teachers really **are** keen for their students to succeed!). Furthermore they will probably give the information to the whole class, since if you can't find the information you need then probably others can't. So you could be helping your classmates by asking.

To prepare for exams (any exams) you should start as early as possible, preferably months before, but certainly not only days before, and most definitely not the night before! **Make sure you know exactly when and where your exams will be, and what the format of each**

**exam will be.** For more advice on exams and revision read **Above Average: Exams.**



To revise for essay format exams first of all practice writing essays with your revision notes. If you can't do this then you need to modify your notes until you can. When you're happy doing this try writing the same essays with reduced notes, and then without any notes.

Finally practice writing essays to time: if you're expected to spend 45 minutes writing each

essay when you're in the exam hall then practice writing essays in that time during your revision. If you typically finish before the 45 minutes is up then you need to find some more information relating to the topics of your essays. If you find it difficult completing your essays in time you may just need more practice. Most people speed up after practising! Alternatively you may be repeating yourself, or writing in a long-winded style. Another possibility is that you're not answering the questions set. Make sure you understand exactly what's expected of you – if you don't then ask someone who does. If you still have problems you may be using too much information, although this is only likely if your extra information is from your own reading, rather than your class notes. See if you can say anything more concisely before cutting out the least relevant information, or editing examples. When you sit your exams make sure you **always** read **all** the questions, being careful to understand what's being asked. **Many students assume they know this before they've read the questions carefully. Consequently some answer what they think or wish had been set.** Always check the back of the exam paper for questions. An otherwise

intelligent student once told me that after an exam he'd turned the paper over to discover there were questions on the back! It's easier to do daft things when you're under pressure.

If you use essay plans in exams make them just long enough to jog your memory and get your facts in order. Don't do as some students do and make plans that take up more space than the essays. It isn't the best use of your time!

Finally don't contradict yourself in exams. If you're going to guess do it one way or the other. You'll at least have a chance of getting it right. I once read an exam essay that started off well, but when halfway through the student started to contradict things that she'd written earlier it became clear that she was confused!

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### *Summary*

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- All of the stages of essay writing are important.
- Preparation includes analysing the task, planning and research.
- Using a plan will help you construct essays in

a logical, balanced and coherent manner.

- Research involves finding, reading and organising **relevant** information.
- Start your research early: obtaining references can take time.
- Find out what kinds of resources you're expected to use.
- Assess the relevance of literature sources by reading the introductions, summaries and conclusions. Skim through the text and look at the contents pages and indexes. Check out the bibliography.
- Work on your essay one section at a time, combining research with writing. Record the references you use **as you go along**.
- Identify and fully reference **all** your sources.
- An essay should have an introduction, main body and conclusion but no sub-titles.
- Paragraphs should each convey **one** main idea, perhaps with examples.
- **Conclusions** should summarise the main points. **No new material should be included and examples shouldn't be given.**
- Except for "journalistic pieces" you'll probably

need to write formally.

- **Never submit the first draft of an essay for assessment.** Any essay should always be edited **at least** once.
- Reword anything that's not clear. If part of your essay is muddled you might need to reread some reference material first.
- Check that the paragraphs, and the sentences within them, are arranged in a **logical sequence**. Use your plan to help you.
- Keep to the word limits set for your essays.
- Check if there are word-processing guidelines.
- Practice writing exam essays from past or specimen papers. Use your revision notes at first. Practice writing to time.
- ***The more you practice essay writing the better your essays will become, and the more you will enjoy writing them!***

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## *College entrance essays*

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College entrance essays (also called application or admission essays) help to sort out the students that stand out from the crowd. They are often used to choose between students with similar academic qualifications: admissions staff are looking for that "something extra" that marks out bright or dedicated students. Sometimes college entrance essays are personal. In other cases they will be on some subject related to the course applied for. In either case the essay is one of the few parts of the application process over which the student has complete control. Admissions staff are looking for evidence of carefully planned, researched and edited submissions. They are looking for essays that are well structured, carefully presented, persuasive and to the point.

Keep the following points in mind when you write your admission essay:

- Your essay must have a main theme. If you try to be too wide-ranging, for example by writing your autobiography,

you could end up with a rather wishy-washy essay which doesn't cover anything in much depth. Such an essay is likely to be thought of as rather superficial.

- If you have a choice about the subject of your essay think about it carefully. Don't just write what you think the admission officers want to hear. They've probably read plenty of essays about how wonderful their university is and how dedicated their applicants are determined to be in their chosen study or career.
- Your theme should be obvious from the outset. It should be possible to determine your theme from the introduction. Get someone else to read your introduction and then tell you what she or he thinks your essay is about. If it's not clear to them, or if they get they wrong impression, you need to think about revising your introduction.
- Develop your main idea with vivid and specific facts, reasons and examples. Support your opinions and conclusions

with well reasoned arguments and evidence. Show your reasoning, don't just state your conclusions.

- Use quotations sparingly and only when they are completely relevant (and preferably by someone reasonably distinguished in the field). Don't use quotations to avoid having to say things in your own words.

- There should be no new information, arguments or examples in your concluding paragraph. This should be a summary of the most important main points and conclusions.

- Make sure you know how to reference your research material properly, both in the text and at the end of your essay.

- Make sure you edit your essay, several times if necessary.

- Think about the structure. Is everything in the right place for a logical development of your theme?

Is anything missing? Have you kept to the point? However interesting you need to get rid of information that is only marginally relevant to your main theme.

- Think about how you've worded your sentences. Have you been overly verbose? Don't use five words when one will do!
- Look out for typing, spelling and grammatical errors. They may be interpreted as carelessness or bad writing. Don't rely on your computer's spell checker, it can miss some errors and mistakes.

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### *Personal Statement Essays*

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College entrance essays are often in the form of a personal statement essay. The topic chosen for such a personal statement essay should reveal some intellectual and/or creative achievements of the applicant. The personal

statement essay is an opportunity for admissions staff to get an idea of what you are like as a person. There is no single right way to write a personal statement essay. In general though the personal statement essay should convey evidence of your achievements that aren't obvious in other parts of your application. The personal statement essay should also show how events have shaped your attitudes and your intellectual curiosity.

The focus of a personal statement essay is you: your ambitions, your principles, your achievements, and the obstacles that you have faced. You need to be honest. Don't just tell the readers what you think they want to know, tell them what they should know about you! Don't, however, gallop through an long list of your achievements (or ambitions) from the year dot. Provide in an depth picture of some aspect of your experiences. Give a lively and compelling picture of you. Demonstrate that you've thought about your experiences, and about what you want for the future. Show how your personality has grown as you persevered to overcome obstacles. Don't complain, beg or brag.

As with any other essay you must consider the essay question or title and make sure you completely understand what is being asked of you. Be sure to explicitly address that question or stay “on topic”. Don’t be tempted to wander off into tales of marginal relevance, however interesting they seem! You also need to know if there is a particular essay format that you must follow. There may be a page or word limit, as well other presentational instructions. You must follow any instructions given. If you are supposed to present an essay of 1000 words then do so. If you present a longer essay you’ll not be given favour for putting in extra effort, rather you will be penalised for not following the instructions, especially if your language is rather verbose. If your essay is to be word-processed then use a 10-12 point standard true-type font such as Times or Arial. Fancy fonts can be harder to read and may not look the same way when transferred between computers or printers.

You’ll have some degree of choice in what you write, even for an essay with a given title. Try “brainstorming”, to gather your ideas onto paper so you can choose the most interesting and

relevant ones for your essay. Get all of your thoughts down so that you don't forget anything (don't censor them yet). Don't worry that you've got a jumbled list of ideas, thoughts and even pieces of thoughts, just get everything out of your head and onto paper.

If your stuck then ask yourself some questions and write down your answers. What do you care about? What are your greatest strengths? What are you best achievements? What incidents demonstrate your responsibility, and how? What are your weaknesses? Have you struggled to overcome or change something about yourself or your life? What is it that makes you different from others? What makes you special? What unusual experiences have you had and how have they affected you? Has some activity or job had an impact on your academic or career goals? Has someone else affected you in some profound way?

When you've finished brainstorming you'll need to identify one theme you wish to pursue in more detail. Think about what might be interesting or unusual to the reader. One way to do this is to group similar events together to

uncover any patterns that might make a theme for your essay.

Check your “brainstorm” notes and add details that will make the events you intend to describe vivid to the reader. What were the key moments of the events involved and what aspects have stayed with you most? What makes them special, unusual or significant? What have you learned, and what do they reveal about you? How have the events made you special or changed in some way? Start developing your plan for your personal statement essay, organizing your ideas into an overall structure. There are different ways to develop the structure of your personal statement essay. You might work from the least to the most significant components of your theme, or you could arrange things in chronological order. Try different methods and decide which one best suits your particular theme.

As with other essays the introduction of your personal statement essay captures the main idea of your essay. This is where you define the theme and establish the tone of your personal statement. You need to get straight to the point,

avoiding flowery language and meaningless prose. Make the introduction to your essay captivating, make it memorable! The admissions staff assessing your essay may well have to read hundreds of other essays by hopeful applicants. You will stand out better if you grab their attention using vivid imagery and startling (but true) details. Avoid using clichés and proverbs, or other worn-out literary phrases in an attempt to grab the readers attention. Try to be original.

In the main part of your essay you'll expand on your theme and provide the details that move that it forward. Think about the transitions between the paragraphs of your essay and look for interesting words and phrases to move your essay along. Make sure that you aren't overusing words and phrases such as "also" and "in addition" to move your paragraphs forward. Avoid starting your paragraphs using numerical transitions, such as first, second, third and finally. The sentences that end the paragraphs should aid the transition into the next paragraph.

Your conclusion should re-affirm the validity of

your essay's theme and show the significance of your experiences in a larger perspective. Don't make your concluding paragraph too general or vague: it should be specific to your essay and your personal situation. Try to avoid using vague or predictable phrases such as "I learned a lot", "I learned that not everyone is the same" or "It was a challenging experience".

A typically poor concluding paragraph is given as an example. Uninspiring language describes ambitions and dreams in a vague, "arm-waving" sort of way, and does not seem to be directly connected to any theme. It is not specific to the essay to which it belongs.

I hope that this essay has shown you what I'm like as an individual. I have my hopes and dreams and will give my best efforts to achieve them. When my ambitions are a bit out of my reach, I press on until I get what I want. I never think negatively.

Once you have a first draft of your essay be sure to revise and edit it – several times if

necessary. Leave plenty of time to proofread. If you can, put your essay away for a few days, and come back to it after a break. You will be more likely to spot errors and to see where you can make improvements. Make sure your writing is clear and precise. It should be vivid without being too flowery: use simpler words in place of longer or obscure words, don't use ten words when one will do! Make sure that each word means what you think it means. Whenever possible use active rather than passive verbs. Everything in your essay should be to the point: delete any parts that don't contribute to your theme. Check your grammar and spelling carefully and, even though this is a personal essay, you must avoid using slang or colloquial language.

When you're happy with your essay try and get feedback from someone else, or even several people, if possible including a teacher. Listen carefully and think about their criticisms and suggestions. Can they identify your overall theme? Can they understand your essay without having to ask for further details or other clarification? Particularly ask your readers to pay special attention to any parts of your essay

that you yourself are unsure about. Ask for written comments if possible, but otherwise write down the comments they make as soon as possible. Revise your essay in the light of your readers responses, and then ask someone to comment on the revised version.

Students often make mistakes in their personal statement college entrance essays. Here are some things to particularly think about, so that you avoid some of the more common mistakes.

1. **Students sometimes do little more than repeat information given in the rest of the application.** This is a mistake since the admissions staff don't gain any additional insights into your personality. It's fine to pick out something from your application if you are going to expand on it and discuss it's significance, but don't try to impress the reader with by listing everything you've ever done.
2. **Complaining about your circumstances isn't a good idea.** You can tell the reader how you've overcome

adversity, but don't use your essay as a chance to have a good moan!

3. **Don't discuss a college's rank or prestige as a reason for applying.** Even if money or rank is important to you, don't say so in the essay. Better to show that you're inspired by learning!
4. **Don't make claims in your essay that contradicted by (or otherwise unsupported by) information in other parts of your application.** If you claim, for example, that your lifelong ambition is to be a top musician your application should show examples of involvement in music related hobbies, clubs and classes.
5. **Be careful if you are applying to more than one place.** You might copy and share between applications, but make sure that one college doesn't get an application addressed to another!
6. **Make sure your essay is the right length.** You may have to state the number of words at the end of your essay.

Remember that the readers will be a reasonably good judges of word counts. They will know if you try to pass off 7000 words as 5000 words!

If your essay's too short consider adding extra examples or exploring particular arguments or subjects in a more detail. Consider the balance of your essay to see where additions can most appropriately be made.

Students often think it's okay to submit essays that are too long. Do not do this! Admissions staff are looking for students who can follow instructions and write concisely. They won't favour you for putting in extra effort, especially if your essay is rather long-winded. They will have many other application essays to read and may be grumpy if they're given too many over-long essays.

If your essay's too long you'll need to edit it. Try rewording sentences and paragraphs to make them shorter. With practice you should be able to cut out quite a lot of words without

substantially altering the sense or information content of your essay. In fact it's often the case that essays edited in this way are easier and more enjoyable to read. Only cut out information as a last resort, or if you've clearly wandered "off topic". The first thing you might be able to cut is the amount of detail given in particular examples.

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## *Persuasive Essays*

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In a persuasive (or argumentative) essay you'll be trying to persuade your reader to "see things your way"! To do this you'll need to be confident that you thoroughly understand your essay topic and the arguments surrounding it. Ultimately you will need to persuade the reader that the conclusions of your persuasive essay are based upon the facts and represent the most reasonable explanation of them. Writing a good persuasive essay therefore involves first reviewing those facts, along with the contrasting arguments given to explain them (i.e. research the persuasive essay topic).

As with any other essay you must consider the essay

question or title and make sure you completely understand what is being asked of you. In particular you need to articulate the dilemma posed by your persuasive essay topic. You might phrase it as a statement or question, but should summarize it clearly and succinctly. Do it for yourself before writing the essay, and then use it in your essay introduction. Get straight to the point. Avoid flowery language and meaningless prose. Avoid using clichés and proverbs, or other worn-out literary phrases in an attempt to grab the readers attention: be original!

While researching your persuasive essay topic you'll need to balance and prioritize contrasting values. It's not just a matter of collecting all the relevant facts, but of analyzing contrasting, and perhaps conflicting, information, evidence and opinions. This isn't easy, but it is a skill worth developing. You'll have to make judgments and choices about what you think is and isn't right. Then you must write an essay that persuades the reader that your judgments are valid and your choices appropriate.

The research for persuasive essays needs to be thorough. The following general advice is

given to help you to tackle the dilemmas you may face when researching your persuasive essay topic:

1. Collect information relevant to your persuasive essay topic. It is very important to have accurate and comprehensive information before starting to write your essay: you can't write a persuasive essay unless you can convey that you're an authority on your essay topic. Although this seems straightforward you should remember that even "facts" can be contentious. You therefore have to be aware of who is presenting the "facts" you have. Are their particular personal, religious, economic, political or cultural beliefs influencing their presentation (perhaps sub-consciously)? Have they done original research or a review of primary literature? (Try to find primary information sources. See the section on essay writing to find out more about primary and secondary information sources.)
2. Identify the various possible solutions. Think about each solution before deciding on your own line. It will be important to show that you know

what the alternative views are and that you have reasons for them being less desirable than your own chosen viewpoint.

Consider what the possible outcomes of particular solutions are? Who wants what and why (what are the vested interests)? The interested parties will usually be obvious, but may not be only those who are most vociferous. They may include governments as well as companies and various pressure groups or public bodies of some kind. Governments won't have action independence, being pressured by voters, industry and those who donate to their party funds, as well as political ideology. Determining the exact nature of vested interests may not be straightforward. Philanthropic actions by companies, for example, may be driven by various forces, including genuine concern on the part of directors, incentives such as tax-breaks and government assistance with funding or favourable regulation, the development of long-term markets, or concerns with public image. Bear in mind that a "potential" good or bad may only be realized given certain political and economic conditions.

Be suspicious of those who know what they want, or

think, without knowing why. Contrary to popular belief it is not necessarily true that one argument is as good as another! The worth of an opinion will depend on whether it is based on reasoned argument supported by objective information (as yours must be!).

3. When you've weighed up the evidence you'll need to be able to articulate your own opinion and say why the other positions are less satisfactory. Choose examples that back up your reasoning and identify the potential benefits associated with your choice of solution. Ask yourself if you are you entirely satisfied with your choice. Do you think you might modify your opinion if other evidence was available that isn't now? If so then you'll need to be able to convey this to your reader.

In your essay introduction you need to accurately state the dilemma posed by your persuasive essay topic. Say what questions will be addressed. Say what you will show during the course of your essay, and say it with conviction!

In the main part of your essay you'll expand on your essay topic and provide the details that move it forward. Explore each of the main possible

arguments in the light of the evidence that you've uncovered during your research. Don't just list the arguments, saying "so and so thinks this, someone else thinks that". You need to say why they think what they do and why you agree or disagree with them. Discuss the evidence that supports or contradicts their (and your) points of view. Don't ramble on, keep to point and be succinct. You need to give the reader the feeling that you know what's what without conveying arrogance (sure but reasonable!).

Your conclusion should re-affirm your view-point and the essence of the main reasons for it. Don't be too general or vague or you won't be convincing. Don't reargue your case or give new examples. If you still feel you need to do this then the main body of your essay needs revising.

Once you have a first draft of your essay be sure to revise and edit it – several times if necessary. Leave plenty of time to proofread. If you can, put your essay away for a few days, and come back to it after a break. You will be more likely to spot errors and to see where you can make improvements. Make sure your writing is clear and precise. It should be vivid without being too flowery: use simpler words in

place of longer or obscure words, don't use ten words when one will do! Make sure that each word means what you think it means. Whenever possible use active rather than passive verbs. It is essential that everything in your essay should be to the point: delete any parts that don't contribute to your theme. Check your grammar and spelling carefully and, even though this is a persuasive essay, you must avoid using slang or colloquial language.

When you're happy with your essay try and get feedback from others. Can they identify your overall theme? Can they understand your reasoning without having to ask for further details or other clarification? Do they find your arguments convincing? Are they persuaded to your viewpoint? If the answer to either of the first two questions is no then you'll need to improve the clarity of your explanations. If your essay isn't persuasive then you need to think about how you are presenting your case. Have you chosen the most appropriate examples and evidence, and have you presented it clearly? Have you left any holes in your arguments? Have you shown why the other arguments should be rejected? Revise your essay in the light of your readers responses, and then ask someone to comment on the revised version.

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## *Illustrative Essays*

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An illustrative essay (or exemplification essay) uses examples to show, explain, or prove a point or argument (the essay thesis). The key to a good illustrative essay is to use enough detailed and specific examples to get the point across. Examples should be carefully chosen so that they will appeal to readers and help them understand the main point of your essay. Effective examples should enhance your writing, giving your illustrative essay vitality and intensity. You may want to review the general essay writing section on essay research before beginning your illustrative essay.

Illustrative essays may contain both brief and comprehensive examples. Brief examples may occur relatively frequently within the essay, with just enough concise details to illustrate clear-cut ideas. It is important that your writing is succinct. Comprehensive examples are used to illustrate complex ideas that can't be adequately explained using brief examples.

The examples used in your illustrative essay must

be relevant, that is they must be directly to the point. You shouldn't necessarily expend lots of ink on a particular example just because you've found a lot of information on it. Instead find as many examples as possible and then be choosy about what you include, using the strongest, most representative, examples. If they lead to unexpected conclusions consider altering your essay thesis in light of the new evidence. Make every example work in your favour.

The examples used in your illustrative essay must also be representative. Unless you're specifically discussing exceptions to a rule your examples must reflect the majority (i.e. what's usually the case, or what is "on average" true). You might, for example, hear a drinker try to deny the risks of heavy drinking because he knew someone who drank every day until he was ninety. This isn't a valid example since most people couldn't drink a lot over an extended period without succumbing to some ill effects. The example doesn't represent what would usually happen to most people. Similarly it wouldn't be representative to say the summers round your way are wet simply because last year the summer was rainy. If the last several summers before this were sunny then one, or even two, rainy summers are not representative of

what usually happens in the longer run.

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## *Cause and Effect Essays*

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A cause and effect essay explores why something happens (its cause) and what results (the effect).

When writing a cause and effect essay you'll need to distinguish cause from effect. In theory you can identify causes by asking "What is it that made this happen?". Then you identify effects by asking "What happened?". For example, I'm wet because I've been out in the rain. The effect is my being wet. The cause of my being wet is having been outside while it was raining. This is a somewhat trivial example, an essay about me being out in the rain is unlikely to win prizes!

In reality it may be much harder to separate causes from effects. Sometimes many causes may contribute to a single effect, for example cancer can be the result of various contributing causes including genetic predisposition and exposure to carcinogenic substances in the environment (of which there are numerous sources). On the other hand many effects may result from a single cause, for example the

closure of a factory may cause job losses and the hardships that go with that, but it could also affect the economy in numerous other ways, for example by reducing the competition for other competing businesses or taking away the market of a main supplier. Main effects may in turn lead to secondary effects, so that one has to untangle a chain of events.

One cause and effect essay topic that makes an interesting example is that of climate change. The effect is climate change, but that in itself is complex and different in different parts of the world, with changes in temperature, rainfall and the frequency and severity of high winds and storms. The causes are complicated too. You might, for example, say that climate change is in part due to the ozone hole, but that has its causes, such as pollution. What's more climate change itself is, or is likely to be, the cause of some pretty drastic events, from tsunamis, to increased sea-levels that could flood coasts and even whole islands, to changes in agricultural conditions and wildlife.

Clearly you should define the scope of your cause and effect essay topic relatively early on, in order that it doesn't get out of hand. It would be better to limit your essay so that you cover some area in

detail. If you try to write a little bit about everything then your essay will end up either being enormously long or rather superficial, or possibly both. What's more researching a wide-ranging cause and effect essay topic would be a long and difficult task.

There may be times when you'll need to qualify your statements about cause and effect. The exact nature of the relationship between events may not always be clear and you might want to discuss this in the light of examples, research and statistics.

When you've defined the scope of your cause and effect essay topic you'll also need to decide on your purpose: that is whether you're writing to persuade or inform. This will depend on the topic chosen and whether it is in any way contentious or otherwise open to debate, or whether you are discussing established facts.

Because of the difficulties that can arise in distinguishing causes and effects it's important to introduce your essay carefully and clearly. Introduce your main idea and tell the reader what the scope of the essay will be. State what are the main cause(s) and effect(s) you will be discussing. You may find it useful to revise your essay introduction after you've

finished the main body. See the main section on essay writing to find out more about writing your cause and effect essay.

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## *Process Essays*

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A process essay describes how to do something or how something happens, either because it's done by someone else or because it happens naturally.

When choosing a process essay topic think about the complexity of the process you'll describe. Pick something suitable for the essay length - a brief process essay is not the place to describe something that needs an instruction manual! You'll need to be able to describe the process you choose in words, without the use of headings, diagrams or other visual aids. Pick something that can be understood from the words of your process essay alone.

If you choose to write about some natural process be careful to define the scope of your essay topic first. Natural processes can be complex, and in those cases it may be

necessary to limit your essay so that you cover some area in detail. You could do this by writing about part of a process or by defining the level at which you will describe the whole process. For example if you were to write about the genetics of coat colour in mice you could write at the level of the effects of the genes on external appearance, or the effect of genes at the molecular level (on coat pigments), or both. The first essay could be fairly straight-forward, and the other two would be much more complicated and require more research and preparation.

Don't begin a process essay by just starting with the first step. Use your introduction to try and interest your readers in your process, by involving them in the human aspects of your process. For example, if you are going to describe how to grow sweet peas first enchant your readers by reminding them how beautiful sweet peas are. Describe their sweet intoxicating scent filling the air on a warm summer evening. Make them want sweet peas in their garden! If you're going to describe how to make apple pie tell your readers how it feels to delight your friends with a mouth-watering pie

and cream. Make them hungry, make them want to have a go! If your essay is about the process of fossilisation share the marvel that we have these tantalising clues to the nature of life so long ago. Wonder at how we can use fossils to reconstruct the past. Perhaps share the joy you felt on finding your own first, or most treasured fossil.

Think about the transitions between the sentences of your process essay. Avoid over-using “next”, and “then”, and avoid enumerating your paragraphs (“first” or “firstly”, “second”, “lastly” and so on). It’s okay when you’re giving someone directions to the garage or telling them how to make Yorkshire pudding, but it’s boring in an essay. Also remember that an essay is meant to be a continuous piece of prose, so don’t use bullet points.

When you round up your essay pick out one or a few essential or particularly interesting points to remind the reader of (remember though that they mustn’t be new points or examples). In the essay on sweet peas, for example, you might stress that these are thirsty plants requiring plenty of water to do their best. For the apple

pie example you might remind the reader not to skimp on the fat or not to use too much water. Perhaps you have a favourite spice that the reader really must try!

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## *Compare and Contrast Essays*

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A compare and contrast essay describes the similarities and differences between things. Those “things” could be just about anything, for example, two books, two alternative biochemical processes, energy consumption in the US and China, or Bluegrass and Cajun music! It is best though to think about the complexity of your compare and contrast essay topic in advance. Comparing more than two things is possible, but in most cases it is probably complicated to do this well, and could take up more pages than you want to write. Similarly choosing two very general topics might cause problems: comparing and contrasting Marxism and capitalism, for example, is probably more suited to a book than an essay!

Writing a compare and contrast essay involves first researching the subjects being compared

and contrasted (i.e. research the compare and contrast essay topic). You need to be confident that you thoroughly understand your essay topic, and that you have accurate and comprehensive information before starting to write. You may want to review the general essay writing section on essay research before beginning your essay.

Think about whether your compare and contrast essay topic will do something other than simply compare and contrast your chosen subjects. Often your essay will also be a persuasive essay, in that you'll come to a conclusion about the superiority of one of the subjects.

You might, for example, compare two theories that provide possible explanations for some natural phenomenon or historical event, e.g. why giraffes have long necks or what happened to Tutankhamun. The similarities between the theories probably include essential features necessary to explain well established facts. The differences, on the other hand, are crucial to deciding whether one theory better suits the evidence than another. You might want to persuade the reader in favour of a particular

theory, and/or you might want to suggest what additional observations or experimental evidence could lead to a discrimination between the two theories.

Another possibility is that you will compare and contrast two methods of doing something and try to persuade the reader that one method is better than another. If you are interested, for instance, in starting and breaking horses you might want to persuade your readers of the benefits of some new method, such as the Monty Roberts' method, over some other traditional method. In such a case you will want to persuade your readers of your own conclusion. Review the section on persuasive essays before starting your essay.

In your essay introduction first say what will be compared and contrasted. Then use your introduction to interest your readers in your subject. Say what is interesting and important about your subjects, and what can be learned from comparing and contrasting them. For example, if you are going to compare two scientific theories excite your reader about the interesting phenomenon the theories attempt to

account for. Is there some human angle you can bring up, some reason why your subject is important or interesting? Are there important advances that could be made if the phenomenon could be explained? Perhaps some new technology or medical advances, perhaps some fundamental insights into the workings of the world? If you are comparing two techniques can you help your readers in some way, perhaps showing them a better, faster or cheaper way to do some something? If you are dealing with some historical event, such as the death of Tutankhamun, start by reminding the readers of something familiar, in this case the magnificent archaeological treasures that made the boy pharaoh a household name. Then engage the readers fascination for mystery – did this happen, or did that? You will present two fascinating alternative explanations that you'll attempt to unravel during the course of the essay.

In the main part of your compare and contrast essay expand on your essay topic and provide the details that move it forward. Organize your information either by dealing with all the similarities and the differences separately, one

after the other, or by alternating similarities and differences, organising information on some other basis. In most cases the alternating pattern is probably more natural, unless your essay is rather short. When there are several points to make it is often easier for the reader deal with each point separately, comparing and contrasting the subjects in relation to one particular point before moving on to the next. In either case don't just list the similarities and differences. Discuss the reasons for similarities and differences, and the significance of them. Why are they important? What do they signify? What is interesting about them? Give details and examples. What conclusions can you draw about your compare and contrast essay topic?

Your concluding paragraph should re-affirm your conclusions, and in the case of a persuasive essay topic, also your view-point and the essence of the main reasons for it. Don't be too general or vague or you won't be convincing. Don't reargue your case or give new examples. If you still feel you need to do this then the main body of your essay needs revising.

Once you have a first draft of your essay be

sure to revise and edit it – several times if necessary. Leave plenty of time to proofread. If you can, put your essay away for a few days, and come back to it after a break. You will be more likely to spot errors and to see where you can make improvements. Make sure your writing is clear and precise. It should be vivid without being too flowery: use simpler words in place of longer or obscure words, don't use ten words when one will do! Make sure that each word means what you think it means. Whenever possible use active rather than passive verbs. It is essential that everything in your essay should be to the point: delete any parts that don't contribute to your theme. Check your grammar and spelling carefully and make sure you've avoided using slang or colloquial language.

When you're happy with your essay try and get feedback from others. Can they identify your overall theme? Can they say what are the main and most important similarities and differences, and why they are such? Can they understand your reasoning without having to ask for further details or other clarification? Do they find your arguments convincing? Are they persuaded to

your viewpoint? If the answer to any of the first three questions is no then you'll need to improve the clarity of your explanations. If your essay isn't persuasive then you need to think about how you are presenting your case. Have you chosen the most appropriate examples and evidence, and have you presented it clearly? Have you left any holes in your arguments? Have you shown why the other arguments should be rejected? Revise your essay in the light of your readers responses, and then ask someone to comment on the revised version.

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## ***About the Author***

Heather E. Ryndaws has a degree and doctorate in scientific subjects, and also studied mathematics with the Open University. She's an experienced teacher who is regularly involved in assessing students, including in examinations. She has much experience in writing non-fiction and counts writing as one of her hobbies, along with horses, painting and scuba-diving.