

Guidelines on Essay Writing in the School of English for JF Students

FOUR Important opening points:

1. REFERENCE STYLE: For assignments in the School of English, you are expected to use the School's Reference Guide available here: <https://www.tcd.ie/English/assets/pdf/style-sheet-update-2018-19.pdf>
2. ESSAYS V.S. OTHER FORMATS OF ASSESSMENT: This guide deals primarily with the most common/traditional type of take-home assessment in the School, which is **the critical essay**. In the Fresh years, most take-home assignments are critical essays, with the exception of some alternative formats of assessment such as annotated bibliography or translation and commentary exercises in modules dealing with Old and Middle English.
3. Wordcounts **include** footnotes and endnotes (as well as any quotations) BUT **exclude** bibliography. Check the Handbook for wordcounts for Freshmen essays.
4. If an essay exceeds the prescribed wordcount by 10% or more, five marks will be deducted. Where the word limit is expressed as a range (e.g. 2000-2500 words), the penalty will be applied if **the upper limit** has been exceeded by 10% or more.

Critical Essay-Writing Q&A

What is an essay about literature?

A critical literary essay (the kinds of essay you are most often asked to write in English Literature classes at TCD) should essentially provide an analysis of a literary text, which proves a thesis (sometimes also called argument) that the essay's writer has come up with. In other words, it needs to be more than just a collection of your assorted ideas about the topic you have chosen and it also needs to be more than a summary or overview of other critics'/scholars' analyses.

What is the relationship between the topic (i.e. one of the numbered prompts on the essay topic sheets) and the thesis/argument you are supposed to come up with?

Think of the prompt/topic you choose as a question or problem and of the thesis or argument you will come up with as an answer or solution to the question or problem, or perhaps as your own unique take on the problem...

How do I know that the thesis I have come up with is right/correct?

In fact, a good thesis is a reading of the text that can be argued with or disagreed with (but that is still generally historically and factually correct and/or plausible). A thesis that cannot be argued with at all is usually a historical fact, plot summary, or too vague. Here are some examples of such inappropriate theses:

- A. 'Shakespeare's *Othello* is a fascinating play, which has gripped readers and audience for many centuries.' (too vague -- you need to say something more specific and interesting)
- B. 'Shakespeare's *Othello* is an early seventeenth-century play.' (historical fact)
- C. 'Shakespeare's *Othello* depicts the tragic outcome of a racially mixed marriage' (plot summary)
- D. 'Shakespeare's *Othello* reflects anti-slavery views, which were rapidly spreading around the world when it was written' (historically implausible/ inaccurate)

Do I need to state what my thesis is anywhere in the essay, and if so, where?

Yes, the thesis/argument should usually be stated in one longer or two shorter clear sentences usually somewhere in the first two paragraphs of the essay but not at the very beginning of the first paragraph; you need to introduce your topic first before you throw the thesis at the reader.

Do I need to explain what happens in the text so that the reader can understand my points better?

Write as if your reader already knows the text (because your lecturers/TAs do!) and so avoid plot summaries. Focus on **how** the text you are writing about communicates meaning rather than merely on **what** it is saying. Make sure to support all your claims with good examples (either in the form of direct quotations or paraphrases).

How do I write/spell titles of literary texts?

Names of short poems and short stories should be in quotation marks ('A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed', 'The Prussian Officer') while names of long poems, plays, and prose works should be in italics (*The Great Hunger*, *Othello*, *Jane Eyre*).

How many paragraphs does my essay need to have?

Your paper should have an **introductory paragraph**, **concluding paragraph**, and a number of **body paragraphs**. You should use the introduction to introduce your topic and get the reader interested in it and the conclusion should review and summarize your argument and possibly place it in some larger context. The individual paragraphs in the body of the essay should each make some particular point. You can think of your argument as consisting of the individual paragraphs as building blocks.

How do I keep the essay relevant to the topic?

Make sure that everything you write is **directly relevant** to the text you are analyzing. Do not include vague pointless generalities of the type: 'Love has been a prominent theme in literature' or 'Chaucer is an important author.'

Can/should I use first person?

Use first person singular (i.e. 'I will argue that...') **only sparingly** and when you genuinely want the reader to note that you are making a specific point here. Generally, avoid 1st person plural, unless you are objectively referring to multiple authors, readers, etc. (Example: do not write 'We can see in this passage...' when what you mean is that you are pointing out something about the passage to the reader.)

When do I need to acknowledge sources?

Both direct quotations and ideas you got from secondary texts (i.e. works written by literary scholars) need to be acknowledged and the information for the source where you found it provided in a footnote AND bibliography. For more information on how to avoid plagiarism, refer to the HANDBOOK.

How do I quote from primary/secondary sources?

Identify direct quotes from the primary texts by including them in single quotation marks and by including the information on the sources text in a footnote or parentheses after the sentence AND also in the bibliography. For details on how to format the quotations, see the Reference Guide linked above.

How much should I quote in my essay?

1. Make sure to use **specific examples** from the texts covered in the module and/or the texts you are using for the assignment to support the points you make. These examples can take the form of a paraphrase or a direct quote. For instance, if you are discussing Othello's final speech, you can:

A. use a paraphrase: In his final speech Othello asks the witnesses of the tragedy to report the events they have seen honestly and accurately.

B. use a direct quote: Othello asks the bystanders: 'Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate' (5.2.346).

C. you can combine these two methods. This approach sometimes works well if the quote itself is a bit difficult and/or you don't explain the quote's context elsewhere in the paper: In his final speech, Othello appears to be telling the story of a man he had killed but as it turns out his lines anticipate his own suicide: 'In Aleppo once/Where a malignant Turk and a turbaned Turk/Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,/I took by th'throat the circumcised dog/And smote him thus' (5.2.348-52).

However, in most cases, an **essay should use a number of direct quotations** because they help make the argument precise and lively. Quotations should always lead into or follow an analytical comment. Together with the analytical comments, they should always be making a specific point about the text.

When do I use block quotes?

See details and examples in the School Reference Guide linked above.