

# Essays and Assignments<sup>1</sup>

## Taking notes when reading

For preparing your essays you will not only have to read and re-read your primary texts, but also a considerable amount of secondary literature on these texts and their contexts. While doing this you should always make notes.

Taking notes when you are reading is an essential independent study skill, and one which will be useful to you long after you have left university. Always keep your notes in order, bearing in mind that you may need to refer to them some time in the future. They must be legible, well-organized and fully referenced. Good notes are essential for good presentations and essays. They also forestall any risk of accidental plagiarism.

## Note source details

Whatever you are reading, whether a primary text or secondary literature, take down the full source reference details. Write down the reference details in the standard form used for bibliographies (see following section), preferably at the top of the sheet of paper or index card you are using. This also facilitates efficient filing. If what you are reading is an article in a book or a journal, remember that you must note down both the details of the article (author - title - first and last page) and those of the book (title - editor[s] - place - year) or journal (title - issue number - year). And the title always includes any subtitle. It takes one minute at most to check this information and write it down fully and accurately, but it will save you a lot of time at later stages of your work. It will enable you to compile accurate bibliographies for essays, and make it much easier to find sources again later.

## Types of note-taking

- **Direct transcription.** That is, copying down. Everything - even a couple of words - that you copy down directly must be marked as a quotation in your notes: use quotation marks both before and after each quotation. Note down the relevant page number(s) after every closing quotation mark. Double-check that your transcription is perfectly accurate, down to every detail of punctuation, especially (but not only) if the text is not in English.
- **Digest/Summary.** Here you are summarising the contents of the text (an argument, an event, a characterisation of a fictional person), in your own words. Consequently quotation marks are not necessary here, but you must note the page number. It is a good idea to try keeping page references running in the left-hand margin as you go along. N.B.: you should make digest / summary notes in general, and only directly transcribe passages which you want to quote in your own words or where the exact wording is of special relevance for the argument put forward.
- **Your own thoughts.** Reflections on the significance, the style, the mood of what you have just read; cross-references to other parts of the texts or to other texts (recurring images and themes); questions you may

---

<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge with gratitude permission to adapt parts of this document on essay writing from the handbook of the Department of German at the University of Wales, Swansea.

be asking yourself; ideas for essays and assignments; and so on: These should be distinguished in your notes through a different colour, brackets, a different lay-out.

## Writing Essays in English

Everybody has a different way of writing essays: this outline need not be followed strictly, but is intended to help you think about the processes involved. Students are permitted to write essays in German, but if they are not native speakers they should consider seriously whether it is wise to do so, as language errors may lead to a lower mark. When writing in German, consult secondary works carefully for formal issues such as referencing, as the conventions are not the same as those set out here.

If, when you have read this section, you feel that you need more detailed advice on the process of putting together an essay, the following works should be helpful. They are given here with their Library catalogue numbers for ease of reference.

Clanchy, John, Brigid Ballard, *How to Write Essays. A Practical Guide for Students*. Melbourne 1992. [PL-214-929]

Coles, Mary, *A Student's Guide to Coursework Writing*. Stirling 1995. [PL-246-352]

### Specialist Areas

Bell, Judith, *Doing your Research Project. A Guide for First-Time Researchers in Education and Social Science*. Milton Keynes 1993 2nd ed. [LEN 301.072 N31] (also for linguistics)

Fabb, Nigel, Alan Durant, *How to Write Essays, Dissertations and Theses in Literary Studies*. London 1993. [PL-218-798]

## The Title

If there is a set title, take some time to reflect on it. Remember that the exact wording of the title is usually very important. Consider the meaning of key-terms and their possible ambiguities. Think about what is implied, even what is significantly omitted; and about what alternative arguments might be considered in response to the title.

If you are choosing your own title, make sure to discuss it with the lecturer who is giving the course for which you are writing the essay. Thus you can avoid the pitfalls of choosing too wide a topic or a misleading path of investigation.

## The Topic

Read the primary texts (for literature seminars) and as much as you can on the topic; take detailed notes; read around it; read lecture notes; discuss with your lecturer, discuss it with your class-mates. Use dictionaries and other reference works to find out the meaning (and sometimes the spelling!) of key terms unknown to you. Use secondary literature to find out more about relevant aspects of the topic or about the text, the author, the social and historical context. Use Tables of Contents, Indexes and Annotations to find the information you need.

## Main Points

Plan your main points. What do you want to say? What points should you make, and in what order? Which are the most important, which secondary or even marginal? How can you fit them into the space and time available? Remember that the word limit which you are given is an **upper** word limit: be realistic about how much material you can deal with in the number of pages allowed, and choose thoroughness over coverage.

You may find the following procedure useful: (i) experiment with ways of reformulating the title in your own words; (ii) 'brainstorm', i.e. write down everything that occurs to you in connection with the topic (iii) having done this, try to group related thoughts together and find an order so that these groups follow on from one another; (iv) on this basis, work out a structure for the essay. You may find it helpful to group and label your notes according to which section of the essay the material will be in: coloured highlighters are useful here.

## Plan

Make a rough first draft or plan in note form, bearing the following structure in mind:

- The **Introduction** should specify the question(s) raised by the title, the approach you intend to take and the aspects you intend to concentrate on. If you have chosen your own title, the introduction might say why you think the area you have selected is worthy of attention. The introduction should **guide the reader** by letting him/her know what to expect.
- The **Argument** should be developed by stages as a series of points. Devote each paragraph to only one or two points. It is essential that you continue to guide the reader through your essay by linking paragraphs, and by using examples to illustrate the points you make. Use examples as follows:
  - In literature essays: (i) by referring to parts or aspects of the text; (ii) by quoting from the text; (iii) by quoting arguments made by other critics; (iv) by referring to aspects of the historical (social and literary) or biographical context; (v) by referring to other works of literature.
- In **Landeskunde/Kulturgeschichte** essays: by making reference to (i) historical data (in specified sources), (ii) interpretations of data (by specified commentators and scholars), and possibly also (iii) theories of society and history.
- In linguistics essays: by cross-referencing your comments closely to the text extract which you will include, giving line references. See the special section on linguistics essays below.
- The **Conclusion** should be a final answer based on the evidence you have assembled. Here you should draw together the strands of your argument to arrive at your own judgement. Bear in mind that the reader wants to know your opinion, but you have to persuade the reader that this opinion is reasonable. You may feel unable to reach a firm conclusion: then you should state succinctly what ambiguities remain, and why. (Conclusions in linguistics essays are quite different: see the special section below).

## Final Draft

Most of us develop our thoughts as we write, and you should practise using writing as a way of developing your thinking. Even if you have made a good plan, you may well find that by the time you reach the end, you have realised

the importance of things you had not thought of at the beginning. To minimize the need for repeated revision, bear the following points in mind.

As you are writing, put yourself in the reader's place: Why am I being told this? Why in this order? Is the argument relevant, consistent and logical? Does it flow? Keep asking yourself these questions; re-read the essay when it is finished and, if necessary, write out another draft.

In writing up from a first draft, consider:

- what you ought to cut out (padding, waffle, repetition)
- what you have realised you need to put in
- how best to lay the essay out (paragraphs and 'signposts') so that your reader knows where they are going at every stage along the way
- how you can make it more interesting and concise: refine your argument
- how you can best illustrate your points (e.g. with quotations - but make sure all your quotations really do illustrate points)
- how you can improve the style and structure: is each sentence well-formed and clearly comprehensible? Do the sentences add up to clearly argued paragraphs? Do the paragraphs add up to a well-structured essay?
- how can you tidy up the presentation: e.g. have you given accurate references for quotations and a complete bibliography?

## **Bibliography**

You must always give a list of the books or articles you consulted when writing an essay, and references in the text of the essay should make it clear that you have actually read those articles and (at least part of) those books.

There are different conventions of how the entries in your bibliography should look. The examples given below represent one type often used in English language secondary literature. If you are writing in German, different conventions might apply. You can get an idea of them by consulting a scholarly work in German.

Whatever form of referencing you decide upon, always keep in mind that it has to be complete, clear, unambiguous and consistent.

## **The Internet**

A word on using the Internet: the Internet can be a helpful **starting point** for your work. Only in rare cases (where a specialist research project regularly publishes their latest work on the web, say) will it provide the specialist knowledge you need. Even if it seems to, you need to be confident that the information is **up-to-date** and **correct** - after all, anyone can set up a web-site called "Latest breaking news on the great 17th C grammarian Schottelius" but the contents might be (indeed probably will be) pure fiction. The Internet is perhaps best viewed as a source of raw data to help you get started (and in a linguistics essay, you might be very interested in the use of foreign words in German Internet sites, say) - it is the start of your search, but rarely the end. On-line encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia and the like are at this stage **never** the best resource for specialist information in Germanic Studies and should not be quoted in your papers. You would be better advised to cite standard literary histories, language histories or the appropriate general references for your subject area.

There is an excellent Internet tutorial available on the web which will help you learn to evaluate the usefulness and reliability of web-sites for your work:

[www.sosig.ac.uk/desire/internet-detective.html](http://www.sosig.ac.uk/desire/internet-detective.html). It takes about two hours to complete and is extremely worthwhile.

If you use a web-site in an essay, dissertation or even for language work, its full address must of course be cited in your list of sources so that readers can follow up the reference if they wish.

### Essays on Literature

In essays on literature it is usual to distinguish between primary literature (the fictitious text(s) you are writing about) and secondary literature (criticism, historical background, biographies etc.). Enter them in your bibliography in different sections, starting with the primary literature. Otherwise, list all the books you have consulted in alphabetical order by author/editor. A general rule is that titles of books are *in italics*, titles of articles or plays or poems taken from a larger volume are placed in inverted commas. Always give the place and year of publication and the edition for the sake of the greatest possible accuracy.

These are the most common types of entries in a bibliography:

### Primary Literature

- \* Book  
Böll, Heinrich, *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum oder: Wie Gewalt entstehen und wohin sie führen kann*, Köln 1974.
- Book with editor  
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, ed. Ehrhard Bahr, Stuttgart 1982.
- \* Volume from the collected or complete works of one author  
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. Goethes Werke, Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden, ed. Erich Trunz, vol. 7, 9th ed. München 1977.
- \* Collection of primary texts with editor  
Kraus, Karl, Stoessl, Otto, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Gilbert Carr, Wien 1996.

### Secondary Literature

- \* Book  
Sagarra, Eda, *Tradition and Revolution. German Literature and Society 1830-1890*, London 1971.
- \* Book within a series  
Ueding, Gert, *Klassik und Romantik. Deutsche Literatur im Zeitalter der Französischen Revolution*, 2 vols., Hansers Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur vom 16. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart, ed. Rolf Grimminger, vol. 4.1. 4.2, München, Wien 1987.
- \* Article in a collected volume  
Gumbrecht, Hans-Ulrich, 'Who is afraid of Deconstruction?', in Jürgen Fohrmann, Harro Müller (eds.), *Diskurstheorien und Literaturwissenschaft*, Frankfurt/M. 1988, p. 95-113.
- \* Article in a journal  
Reeve, William, „O du - wie nenn' ich dich?“ Names in Kleist's „Käthchen“, in *German Life and Letters* 41 (1987), p. 83-98.

## Footnotes

References to texts included in the bibliography, whether to identify a quotation or a paraphrase, can be given in brackets after the quotation/paraphrase, in a footnote at the bottom of the page, or in an endnote at the end of the essay.

In all these cases the reference must include the author, a short title of the book/article or the publication year and the page number. Students often tend not to give the page number, although this is of prime importance. Without it, a reference is almost worthless, as it is difficult to trace it in the original text. Your lecturers might check the context/accuracy of your quotes, so it is imperative that you always give page numbers.

In published scholarly work, you will often find additional material or the discussion of side aspects in the footnotes. This is not a good practice in a student essay, as it is often detrimental to its cohesion and structure. Footnotes in student essays should be restricted to referencing only.

## Essays on Linguistics

The conventions which linguists use when they write are not always the same as those used by literary scholars. Although much that has been said in preceding sections applies to essays about linguistics, there are some special features which you should bear in mind.

## How to cite literature appropriately in a linguistics essay/dissertation

### In the bibliography:

Linguistics generally uses the Harvard or author-date system. Items appear alphabetically by author (or editor), and no distinction is made between primary and secondary literature. Both place of publication and publisher are given.

The format for the most common types of works you'll want to cite...

- Book:

Clark, J., & C. Yallop. 1990. *An Introduction to Phonetics and Phonology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Edited book:

Anderson, J.M., & C. Jones (eds.). 1974. *Historical Linguistics II. Theory and Description in Phonology*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.

- Article in a journal:

Bailey, C.N.J. 1977. "Linguistic change, naturalness, mixture, and structural principles." *Papere zur Linguistik* 16, 8-73.

- Article/chapter in an edited book:

Browman, C. 1994. "Lip aperture and consonant releases." In: *Phonological Structure and Phonetic Form. Papers in Laboratory Phonology III*, ed. P. Keating. Cambridge: CUP, 331-353.

- If the work you have used exists in several editions, you may either write out "(2nd edition)" etc. after the title, or simply indicate the number of the edition with a raised figure before the year of publication, e.g. <sup>7</sup>1997 would indicate that you have used the 7th edition, published in 1997.
- Don't cite sources that you yourself have not used. If while reading Smythe 1983 you come across something interesting from Jones 1981, you should refer to it as Jones 1981:263, cited in Smythe 1983:18. Of course, if you have yourself used Jones directly, then cite directly from there.

### **In the body of your text:**

In linguistics it is most common to use the name of the author, date and (if appropriate) the page number of the work in brackets.

eg Pintzuk (1991:63) concludes that there is no evidence that pronoun objects are clitics within the verb phrase.

OR There is no evidence that pronoun objects are clitics within the verb phrase (Pintzuk 1991:63).

You may need to differentiate Pintzuk 1997a, 1997b, etc. if the author has more than one publication from the same year. These works should then also be indicated as such in your bibliography.

### **Writing a linguistics essay**

- In order to comment on linguistic features, you must always refer to a specific piece of material - written text(s), tape(s), video(s), answers to a questionnaire. When you use written texts, you should always give the source, and indicate the language, dialect etc., and period of the text. If you are using a tape or video as your source, it will have to be transcribed according to stated conventions, and this transcription will have to be included as part of the essay. Ms O'Sullivan will give advice on appropriate forms of transcription.
- Whenever you quote linguistic examples in the body of your text, they should be in italics. They should be followed by the English translation placed in single inverted commas. If you cannot use italics, underlining is an acceptable substitute. Examples should be labelled with their language of origin:  
e.g. In Frisian the numbers 'one' to 'three' have a separate form before a masculine noun: *ân hûn* 'one dog', *iinj wûset* 'one woman'.
- When you wish to compare a construction with a similar one from a language known to you, the abbreviation cf. (Latin *confer*, 'compare') is useful.
- It is usual to use abbreviations such as NHG, OHG etc. for language names and groups. These should be listed and explained on a separate page at the beginning of your essay, immediately after the title page.

### **Content**

- In linguistics essays you will very often be writing a piece which is descriptive and analytical, rather than presenting an argument. This means that a conclusion is often unnecessary, since your essay will have presented a detailed analysis of a text and its features, without leading to any particular result. Do not feel worried if you realise that you have reached no definite endpoint. In this case the end comes when you have discussed the text from all the angles required of you (phonological and morphological analysis, for instance).
- In general, the reader will not be expecting to find out what your opinion is, and you should omit it. An exception is in sociolinguistic analyses of surveys

and other more personal material, particularly where attitudes to language are involved.

- You will often find that your essay falls into two quite distinct halves, for example if you are writing on 'The Hanseatic League and MLG' or a similar historico-linguistic topic. Remember that history is not simply a series of undisputed facts, but that you will be selecting and thus interpreting what is relevant from a linguistic point of view. Generally this means that areas like education, culture, access to written material are more relevant than kings and battles. You will usually only need to give a very general indication of the historical situation of your text - its place of origin, for instance, and the relevance of that place in the contemporary scheme of things - rather than giving a blow-by-blow account of all the historical events of that century. The history should be providing contextual information for the linguistic part of the essay, and your introduction should make clear how the essay as a whole hangs together. Again, you must **guide the reader**.