

Writing ESSAYS

This is not particularly difficult - if you can write a shopping list and read a textbook you can write an essay. The basic principles are simply - be clear, be concise, be precise.

I find it helpful (as writer and as reader) if the piece has an evident structure, e.g. a beginning, a middle and an end. In your introduction say what you're going to put in the main essay. In your conclusion summarise what you put in the main essay - thus you would have a skeleton like this

Introduction X is an important aspect of children's behaviour which all teachers and parents should know about
In this essay I am going to discuss X in relation to A - G, and to conclude by drawing inferences about how teachers and parents should enhance the development of X in children.

Main Essay X
 X + A X + G

Summary In this thesis I have discussed X in relation to A, B, C, D.....+ G. This may be summarised as follows: recommendations for education/conclusions.

The longer the piece of work the more important some sort of explicitness about what's in it becomes. You will come across introductory textbooks which use this sort of plan for each chapter. Journal articles similarly tend to have a very firm standardised order of contents.

It is often a useful planning device to set out a skeleton contents list - chapter headings with notes of content, paragraph headings even - before doing much writing. The exact order can always be revised when you see how the written text shapes up. In planning contents you will of course have in mind constructing a thorough orderly description or a reasoned argument.

At this level you should be writing the essay yourself, not stringing together chunks from other people's books, especially not chunks from other people's general textbooks. Plagiarism is one of the faults which lead to essays being graded "Unsatisfactory". It is very rare for something to be so well-written that it would be sacrilegious to précis it. Practice making notes from the material you read (as quick as and cheaper than photocopying) and write up from notes and précis not from the book. This at one and the same times makes using chunks less likely and interweaving material from different sources more likely. Be careful to give credit for quoted material and borrowed arguments - "Smith argues that", "As Jones says ''".

You should also be putting a lot of your own judgment into your essay. "Material from sources is carefully and critically selected, interpreted, compared and evaluated." People sometimes feel that they don't know enough to be critical. There may well be technical points that you can't evaluate, but there are lots of things you can look for, e.g. what sort of evidence (and how much and how representative) is the argument based on? Is the explanation put forward the only one? the simplest?

the one which best fits with other work? Can you detect bias in the author? Has there been a clear definition of terms, and has the same definition been stuck to throughout? If the ideas seem to contradict "commonsense" or other evidence, which is wrong? Don't assume that just because something is in a book or a journal (or a lecture) that it is TRUE. This is not true.

((If you believe that it is wrong the thing to do is find evidence to back up your belief, and spell out the argument. Assertions (whoever makes them) without argument or justification are not evidence. Don't make too many assumptions. Have an eye on concepts, definitions and meanings. For example, if you're discussing the statement "Children need to play" it could be sensible to consider what sort of children, what sort of need and what sort of play. You will probably have to restrict full discussion to one sort of each, e.g. "4-year-olds could do with playing rhyme games in order to enhance their understanding of what you can do with sounds of words".

Referencing sometimes seems to be a major problem. There are a number of ways of doing it, and if you have a consistent system that you're happy with and other people understand, stick to it. Personally I use the A.P.A. format.

The main point is to make sure i) that ideas, data and quotations in the text are attributed ii) that they can all be traced. If you include a quotation, ideally you should give a page reference (and specify the edition - different editions often have different paging!). All references in the text should appear in the bibliography or reference list at the end. If your reference in the text is to a paper (by Jones, say) which you only know through a mention of it by Smith, it is dishonest to refer (in text or bibliography) to Jones only. It gives the impression (to the credulous - and essay markers tend to be suspicious, rather than credulous) that you have read obscure foreign pieces dating back to 1923, not the general textbook which summarises it. You have also not checked that Smith got his reference right and that the printers printed it correctly - neither of these is certain. I would reference it in the text as (Jones 1923, **cited by** Smith 1977) and in the bibliography as "Jones 1923 cited in Smith 1977" This is cumbersome but honest, and best for people trying to trace an interesting reference. It might occasionally be worth getting hold of the original Jones 1923 - if it is central to your argument, say.

Most of what I have so far relates to clarity and precision. It is also a good idea to be concise (not least because of the limited attention span of readers). Planning structure and clarity of concepts will help with this. If you can't deal with everything relevant in 3,000 words you need to do something like saying "A - Z are relevant to this subject but I am only going to discuss B, Q & T because they are of particular interest/central/most in need of discussion" etc. This seems to me an acceptable strategy provided that you have justified your choice of B, Q & T. Don't, however, assume that everyone will approve. You are in trouble if B, Q & T are self-evidently trivial or not related to the subject. It might be wiser then to ask if you can write an essay with a different title about B, Q & T.

N.B. These remarks apply, more or less to all essays, dissertations, seminar papers etc.