

GUANGZHOU UNIVERSITY: DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
BUILDING AND USING AN ESSAY PLAN

PREVIEW

At some stage in your undergraduate course leading to the B.A. degree in English you will be required to produce an extended formal essay in English, possibly on a topic in English Literature. During your course you will be attending classes in composition, and these will help to prepare you for the task of composing a formal essay. The notes which follow here are intended to assist you, when you are assigned such a task. Their more specific purpose is to give guidance to the 2005 third-year English Writing Classes 1-7, in preparation for the final Project Essay Assignment.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

The first step is to select a possible theme or topic. Review where your own active interests are located, and also what topics might be practical: not too large or too small. Will you be able to find the resources that you need? Take your time to consider carefully. When you have made a provisional choice of topic, consider the large field of your topic and the possible range of material which it might contain. Before you go too far with this preparation work you may need to discuss the project with your class teacher, to be sure that it has good potential for success.

Now you will be ready to make a more or less definite choice of general theme for your essay. You will not be ready at this early stage to make definite choices about how you will select and treat your specific topic, nor what will be its boundaries and central points. At the beginning your preparation will involve reading widely and paying special attention to background, to the wider context of your overall theme. If your theme is taken from literature and is concerned with a particular author or with particular books, then the relevant background may include biographical material and general studies of his or her works. Also you will need to become acquainted in outline with the social and cultural history of the relevant historical period, and with the kinds of written works produced at that time and the styles of writing that were in use. Make notes as you continue with this study-work, and be careful that they are clear and accurate, so that you will be able to use them at a later stage.

METHOD OF PRODUCTION

For most formal essays of this kind you will be expected to produce a text for submission that is word-processed and printed out, possibly following instructions given to you beforehand. Be sure that you understand what is required, and that you have access to the technical hardware and software that you need. Work out a system to keep all your notes and drafts in clear order, and to save them with file-names

that you can recognise; try to keep all your material accurate, and to record all your references carefully as you go along. Be especially careful to make full regular backups of all your electronic material; keep a copy of it on a separate disk if possible, so that if your main system breaks down, you still have all the material safe and sound. Even if towards the end you are in a great hurry and do not have much time, it is important to remember this point. If some of your notes are in handwritten form, keep these too in clear order; if some of your notes are in the form of comments and markings in a copy of a particular book, look after this book well and do not leave it in a library or classroom where it might not be safe.

TIMETABLE

Your instructions concerning the production of a formal essay will include notification of a deadline, a date by which the completed essay must be handed in. This deadline will be absolutely strict, and your plans must allow enough time to be sure not to be late. Work out your allocation of time for each stage of the preparation and drafting, and leave a few extra days towards the end for unexpected delays and emergencies. You might spoil everything if, after much careful preparation, you have to rush at the finish and hand in work that is not really complete. Plan your essay: and plan your time!

THE ESSAY PLAN

Gradually, your ideas will begin to take shape, and you will begin to recognise some possible ways to construct your essay; you will have many different ideas which point in different directions, and you will need to start thinking about a plan. When you are ready, you need to set aside a session for a full review of all your materials and for possible links that could join up various aspects. You need to find a central theme or topic that really interests you, which will help you to develop a point of view and your own ideas. To start building your essay plan you need to be as clear as possible about what will be its central topic: then you need to consider the structure of an essay, that it must have a beginning and middle and end, that it must be connected together so that it has a development leading from the start to the conclusion.

Write down your plan in note form, with headings for each possible section and a brief sketch of the materials for each section. This plan does not need to be rigid and you will probably change it several times; but it will give you some guidance as you are working out your essay and starting to write your first drafts. Your plan does not need to be concerned with details; its chief function is to help you find a good shape for your essay, its links and sequence, and to decide what shall be included and what excluded.

This is the principle of RELEVANCE, which together with INTEREST will help you to decide on what to include. Relevance is not a general idea, it is specific to your essay, and you have to decide what will help your essay to have a good development: what are to be its active context and purpose. Interest is more general. Within a larger context of ideas and information, some features can be rather dull and obvious, whereas others can be really interesting and unusual. These two aspects

(RELEVANCE and INTEREST), must be taken together. This means that material appropriate for inclusion in your essay must be both interesting AND relevant: what is interesting but *not* relevant must be rejected, and also what is relevant but *not* interesting. Some bright ideas that do not fit in may have to be sacrificed! Making a careful essay plan will help you to recognise these distinctions more clearly.

At the same time, keep in mind the question of due PROPORTION. Central, important ideas will need more space, whereas minor or marginal ideas can be treated more briefly. You must make your own decisions about what will be central for your essay, and what will be marginal. Don't waste too much space on formalities like introductions or summaries of background or explanations of incidental features, because you will be working within a limited allocation of words (the maximum word-count), and if you keep a good control of space and judge your proportions carefully you will achieve a well-shaped balance between the various parts and stages of your essay. Dull, routine material will deprive your treatment of interest and energy. Concentrate on the active parts. Unnecessary repetition is the great enemy of good design.

In a similar way, work out the links that will join your opening material through the sequence of sections and paragraphs to the final conclusion. This will help you to decide whether a certain section should come close to the beginning, or closer to the end. If the links are merely a list of aspects then your essay will again lack energy. Try to find an active logic for the order of the various parts, so that your essay has an argument and a direction, leading the reader towards a positive result rather than just towards the end.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Make certain you have collected together all the material that you need, together with your notes. Study your essay plan and keep it always in your mind. Review any instructions about the essay you are to write, including the limit on length, restriction (if any) on topic, and the time available before you must hand your essay in. If your essay is on a literary theme or topic, and presents a discussion of a specific literary work, be sure that you are using a good up-to-date edition.

WRITING STYLE

A formal essay requires to be composed in a more or less formal style. This does not mean that it has to be elaborate and grand; but it does mean that you should avoid slang or expressions that are used only in casual speech. Try to give your sentences a good balance; good use of punctuation will assist you. Aim to be clear but not too obvious. You can be sure that your reader will be well-informed, so that you do not need to explain every detail. If you are tempted to be humorous, be careful, since an inexperienced user of English can make mistakes with humorous touches. Be economical with providing information, and try to avoid repeating the same material, even indirectly. But do not attempt to exclude all personal aspects of your own point of view; write in a lively and natural way, as if you are having a thoughtful conversation with an alert and intelligent person. You do not need to be

completely certain about every idea which is part of your opinion, because an essay is a form which allows you to experiment and to explore a topic in search of some fresh approaches; but some serious questions and strong examples will give your essay a good strength of character.

INTRODUCTION

This should be brief and specific. State your general topic-field, place it in general context, indicate your overall motive or approach. Outline the boundaries and limits of your treatment: what will be included, what excluded. State the main kinds of material to be used, what method or methods will be employed. Which features of this essay will be original, and which will be adapted from the work of others? Aim here for clarity, brevity, a good sense of control and direction.

TOPIC FOCUS

What is the central idea of the essay? What is it trying to do? Can the nature of the enquiry be defined accurately? Remember: *a carefully and accurately defined question is already more than half-way to a good answer*. Choose a TITLE that exactly represents your topic focus. Then, state the aim by using key terms that will need to be defined as you work through your treatment. Try not to have two or more aims side by side, or your essay will split into divided parts; but one aim *leading on to another* is quite possible.

Try to set up your aim in the form of a problem or question, an issue or challenge that needs an enquiry leading to answers or results. If you state your aim in a flat, descriptive manner, your essay will lack force and engagement. Turn your statement into a question, to which the answer doesn't seem too obvious, or even visible. Approach your topic from a distinctive angle, rather than just from the front in a standard, usual way.

ASPECTS

Next, divide the material to be discussed into a series of *aspects*, following on from the question or questions that define the focus of your enquiry. Keep to your essay plan, but if you make modifications to it, constantly review your overall planning to see that you will not be in danger of losing your shape. Each aspect can make up a distinct section of the main body of your essay. Each aspect will need to draw in some illustration or analysis, by selection of appropriate examples and comparisons, to support its argument. The range of aspects that you can afford to consider, and the amount of detail you can include, will depend on the overall limit of length that is set, the word-count: you can assign blocks of space to your list of aspects, to work out the internal balance of your finished composition within its defining shape (see above, on PROPORTION). The sequence of the aspects will need to follow a logical development: maybe from the general to the specific, or from cause to effect, or from neutral description to critical appraisal and judgement.

Note here that the term 'critical' does not mean hostile or disapproving or taking an opposing view. It means making an analysis so as to work out and justify your own approach and drawing your own conclusions, based on your own interpretations and judgement and not merely on the opinions of other people. 'Literary Criticism' is the name of an approach to reading works of literature which is critical in this sense.

As you introduce new key terms or any special use of words, you will need to give careful *definitions*. Often, to support illustration and analysis, you will need to introduce *quotations*; and at key points you may need to select one or more extended passages for quotation. If you quote from a Chinese source you will need to include an English translation. Be careful to quote accurately, and to give full and correct references (see below).

LINKS

As you develop your series of aspects, following the logic of your central argument as worked out in your essay plan, take care to display clearly the links in the sequence. Think of them as turning-points or hinges. At each new aspect, review the connections with what has gone before. Remember: *a chain is only as strong as its weakest link*. Keep your eye firmly on your title and your topic focus, the question or problem that is your main idea, so as to exclude interesting but irrelevant material. The link in each case does not have to be stated too obviously; but the reader of your essay needs to feel that the sequence of links is firmly under logical control. If it might be helpful to your structure you may if you wish include headings to distinct sections of your essay; but be careful not to interrupt the natural flow of your discussion. Try to consider the reader's point of view and the effect that your essay will have when it is read by another person.

Remember that when you combine sentences into a paragraph, the paragraph-unit will broadly treat one idea or aspect, before it concludes to make way for the next paragraph which leads on to the next part of the sequence of ideas. Thus, even the links between paragraphs are part of the overall logic and movement of your essay: all of your links should serve an active purpose.

OPTIONS

At some stage in your development of aspects, you may need to consider alternatives, or variant options. For example, you might say, at this point it would be possible to advance in several different directions; or, here we have a choice of methods that we may use; or here, there are some differences of opinion among other scholars, and so on. Careful control is needed at this point: you may need to make a very brief review of each option, before then choosing what seems the most relevant and useful, in the light of the overall aim of your essay, what it is trying to achieve.

APPROACHES

The opening stages of your essay will contain much that is *descriptive*,

giving information about background, perhaps some biographical and historical context, and briefly outlining the character of the work or works that you have chosen to discuss. But do not include too much of this descriptive material: do not give a complete summary of the plot of a famous novel, or a list of the characters, because this can quickly become rather boring. Once you have established the descriptive material at the start, you can go on to develop a more *literary-critical* approach: why and how is this a good book, what strength does it have of human understanding, how does it control and develop its treatment of feelings and ideas and conflicts; do you find any power of imagination, does the writing style arouse your own strong or lively involvement, as you read? Questions like these will help you to move on from factual description to literary criticism, and will give your own essay a stronger character.

If some of your text material is not modern but comes from an earlier period of history, remember that the world has changed since those times, and that ideas and attitudes and points of view were not the same then as they are now. You will need to understand these differences clearly, by studying the historical background, and also by considering how styles of writing and choice of words undergo many changes: what may seem old-fashioned to you now may have seemed thoroughly modern at the time.

Remember also that the reader of your essay does not need to share your opinions or point of view, or agree with your arguments. Often there can be quite wide differences of judgement, and of course this is acceptable and to be expected: in matters of personal understanding it is likely that there will be no 'correct' answer or method of treatment. Your presentation can be modest in manner but does not need to hold back your own opinions. If your reader does not agree with some aspects of your essay, this will cause no problems if your discussion makes its own clear good sense and can be justified by supporting argument and examples. An essay with a distinct point of view is usually preferable to one which is so careful that it has no character of its own.

DISAGREEMENTS

Much of your essay will adopt the manner of outline presentation, giving factual background in a neutral way, especially at the beginning. But an essay also permits and encourages discussion and argument, even disagreement. When you put forward your own opinions you can 'make the case' for your own point of view, even if you know that other scholars and critics hold differing views. Do not be afraid to disagree with what others have said, or at least to put forward your own interpretation. This is 'critical thinking'. Sometimes you will be referring to the opinions of Western scholars, whereas you of course are seeing things from a Chinese viewpoint. It is good to develop a contrast between such different aspects, and to indicate what are the features and possible causes of such difference. Sometimes you will disagree over interpretation and motive, in for instance discussing a turning-point in a narrative (perhaps, in a novel); or you may be considering a general idea, such as, that loyalty within a family should always be

more important than individual plans and wishes, and yourself taking up a contrary point of view. In such cases, don't suppress your own opinion, but rather explore the disagreement and give your reasons and evidence for your judgement. You need to be careful to represent opposing views fairly, and always to be polite in tone. But your essay will be much more distinctive if it contains some argument that does not just agree with some 'standard' attitude or method of approach.

REFERENCES

Each time you include a quotation from the book or books that you are studying or from a secondary work of background history or other reference material, you must include a full and accurate finding-reference to your source. This means giving the details of the text or book or article or website that you have used, and then the pages or sections from which your quotation is taken. You may do this by means of numbered footnotes or by means of references within the body of your essay, but your method should be consistent and easy to understand: your composition textbook will give details and examples. Remember, if in your essay you borrow ideas or descriptions which are not your own, and do not acknowledge this by means of a full reference in each case, that is cheating (plagiarism) and will be punished.

CONCLUSIONS

As you draw your treatment of aspects towards completion, bearing in mind your limit on length and word-count, your argument should begin to narrow down and approach its ending-stage. Again, pay close attention to your essay plan, as modified by the development of your essay as you have been writing it. Here you will need to bring all your links into brief review, to work them into a final judgement or point of view or outcome to the enquiry. Do not let your conclusion be just a flat statement of the obvious. If your topic focus contained the energy of a problem or question, your conclusion should be active with the same energy in reverse: the resolution of the problem, or the answer to the question, or at least *your* answer. Do not be afraid to assert your own concluding critical judgement or opinion. If you have given your reasons, and supported your views with illustration and analysis, then your judgement will be more than mere personal preference: it will be evidence of a critical intelligence, convincingly at work.

When your first draft is completed and word-processed, leave enough time to correct slips of detail: check grammar and spelling, verify all your quotations once more, and be sure that your format for presentation conforms precisely to instructions. You will be very familiar with common mistakes in English grammar that Chinese students often make: watch out for these, and put them right! If you are required to provide a summary or abstract of your essay, leave enough time to deal with this carefully; if there is an official cover sheet that you are required to fill in and attach to your essay, ready for submission, make sure that you prepare this neatly and accurately. If you are required to give the total number of words in your submitted essay, there are methods for making this count within most word-processing programmes. If you notice small mistakes at the very last moment, it is

permitted to correct these in neat handwriting. Remember that you may not show your draft to anyone else, for comments or improvement, because then the essay would not be all your own unaided production. The cover sheet for your essay is likely to require you to sign a declaration that you did not have outside help with composing and writing it.

BEGINNING-MIDDLE-END

The last few sentences will need extra care. You may need to draft them several times, to get them right; but also you must be careful not to damage their natural flow and energy. As you draft them, look back to the wording of your topic focus, at the beginning. Study your essay plan, to be sure that you have not lost any important feature of the original scheme. Test your final sentences to be sure that they join up in overall logic with your topic focus and your title: that what you set out to do has now been done. You do not need to claim that you have given 'the last word', the complete final answer in all respects; you can be moderate in asserting your conclusion. But the beginning and the end of your essay must *connect and join*, strongly and convincingly. Then the whole essay will stand up, and make sense, and have a good shape.

FINISHING POINTS

Once the whole body of the essay is planned out and composed from start to finish, you will need to check the word-count, construct the notes and references, and compile a simple bibliography (including websites consulted, if any: see below). Take care with all the correct details, to give the best possible impression. Number your pages in correct sequence, from start to finish.

Then leave a gap of a few days, to stand back from your composition; and then read it through with close attention to its structure and flow and logical connection. You may need to tighten loose links, clarify ambiguous expressions, improve clumsy use of idioms or inappropriate shifts of style. Remember, do not take or adapt material from any other sources without making full acknowledgement. Pay special attention to the accuracy of your quotations and references: check them again if you are in any doubt. If you are at all uncertain about the spelling of some words, look them up in your dictionary and correct them, because poor spelling makes a bad impression. Generally tidy and polish the whole text, so that there are no confused parts or broken links. Be sure that the formatting is clear and that the essay will have a good appearance when it is printed out, on good-quality paper. Then, you are done!

J.H. Prynne

Guangzhou, 17th May 2005

APPENDIX : MAKING A SIMPLE BIBLIOGRAPHY

A bibliography is a list of books and articles and reference materials selected and put into order to serve a specific purpose. It is often attached to a formal essay as a way of showing what works have been consulted in preparing the essay, and of making acknowledgement that you have taken some of your information or ideas from these sources.

Some major works of scholarship include very extensive and detailed bibliographies. For a short essay you do not need to be totally inclusive. Just make a careful note of the main books and articles that you have read and the internet websites that you have consulted and used. The standard form for an item in such a simple list is: name of author(s) or editor(s) (family name first); then title of book or article; then name of publisher, place and year of publication. For a website, give the full internet address, author of the material (if given), title of the item, with section-reference, and date (if also given). Your composition textbook will provide guidance about precisely how to present items in a bibliography.

The arrangement of entries should be consistent and follow a helpful scheme. For example, you may present several sections, each with its own heading: works in Chinese, followed by works in English; or, primary works followed by secondary works, followed by websites, and so on. Within each section, arrange the lists in alphabetical order of author-name (pinyin family-name), with good spacing so that each item is clear. Be careful to check the complete accuracy of all entries, including spelling and use of capital letters; leave enough time to take good care of these important details.