

TIPS ON PRESENTATION OF ESSAYS, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. These notes are written principally for undergraduates starting out in their first year of the English course at Caius, though they may have a use for students at a later stage, as a reminder. The essays here being considered are those normally written week by week as part of a course of supervisions, rather than dissertations, portfolio essays or essays written in exams; though all of those other types of essay require techniques broadly similar to these discussed here.
2. Writing an essay as part of a supervision assignment is a skill that develops with time and practice. Different kinds and scales of project, giving you shorter or longer preparation times, will draw on different levels of skill and technique, and individuals also develop distinctive personal styles of argument and discussion.
3. Broadly, a well-shaped essay requires a strong focus and grasp of the texts and issues; plenty of fresh and lively ideas, nicely fermenting; a clear articulation of the internal sequence by which beginning, middle and end are purposefully connected; some close analysis of text material presented with insight and accuracy; some grasp of background and context and some direct critical assessments which are not just a paraphrase or summary of opinions belonging to other people (even to your supervisor).
4. Most of what follows is addressed to somewhat more mundane matters, of basic presentation and management. Accuracy, clarity and good manners in essay-writing are primary virtues, and a few simple conventions make these virtues easier to attain. If you decide to submit a Portfolio of essays in Part I of the Tripos, such good manners will be important; when you come to compose a Dissertation for Part I or Part II, this aspect will matter even more. Good practice developed early will make a habit of virtue.
5. Plan your week's work to allow time for reading and pondering the basic texts first of all. Editors' glossaries and notes and introductions, and historical background, and secondary criticism, come into play as sources of assistance with the primary task of text-reading. Supervisors and Lecturers will be issuing reading lists which will guide you to preferred editions and useful secondary books and articles. Remember to use a well-edited modern text as recommended to you; older texts may be inferior, and some published only yesterday can be just as poor. If you can afford to own a decent text, even in paperback form, then you can annotate the margins (*not* in Library books!) and flag up key passages for speedy reference. As you read and study, hold the essay task in your mind, so that a response to it will gradually take shape.
6. Many essays will be based on giving an account of an author new to you, and quite often of a single large and challenging text. Do not be daunted by your task; alert and thoughtful reading will soon usher you into questions of interpretation and critical judgement which are your own in the sense that they are generated from your direct response to the reading process. But

remember that your essay-reader knows these texts quite well also, so that descriptive summary of the structure or narrative is performing no useful function unless you have some specific purpose in mind, just as explanation can become wearisome if explain is all that it does. Following point by point along the sequence of development in a play or extended poem amounts in most cases to an enslaved literalism; anything that is preliminary to active discussion can be reduced to the barest minimum.

7. Different occasions and stages of preparation invite different kinds of essay. If you are approaching a major area of reading and study for the first time you may opt for an essay which reviews the context and sets out some lines of definition and approach. In other cases you may have formed a more specific argument or interpretation of a central text or of certain key aspects; or, yet again, you may want to justify and defend a critical evaluation, either relative to other works or in larger, more absolute terms. An essay which is divided up into serial treatment of aspects and attempts no concluding acts of judgement may be unduly defensive and simply not very interesting, just as reviewing the critical opinions of others without any energetic development of your own can become a habit verging on the timid. A successful essay will push the boat out with some significant risks, at the far edge of your range of insight and control, so as to extend your powers even if you occasionally miss your way.

8. Try not to get too involved with secondary criticism until you have worked out your own interpretations as far as you can. The order of study, with of course many overlaps, should be: texts; then basic linguistic and vocabulary aspects; then historical contexts; then secondary criticism. Remember that you are testing all interpretation and judgement, including your own, back against the texts as you come to understand them and the contexts from which they emerge. This includes each essay that you write; every time you advance some opinion or interpret some passage you have quoted, pause to attempt the distinction between the hasty-smart, the maybe-plausible, and the true.

9. Leave yourself enough time to brood closely over your essay and sketch out a plan for it before you begin to write. Time is short in the rush of term time; as you get used to this rush, you will recognise the merits of planning ahead, looking forward to the forthcoming essay for next week or the week following, making reconnaissance of themes which you guess will interest you and doing strategic advanced text-study during vacations. Remember that if you are due to hand in an essay by a specific agreed time, failure to do so will annoy your supervisor and will disrupt the following supervision, perhaps severely.

10. When you start to write a particular essay, remember the advantages of a brief plan, with notes and headings in outline form. You can vary from this, or even deviate completely, but a plan helps to hold the discussion into a coherent frame. Don't write the whole essay in extended draft as a first move, because you will soon find that this uses up too much prime time. You must build your essay's sequence as you write it down. With practice you will find that you can edit critically and plan forward in the actual process of writing; this is an important skill and will also help you with examinations in due course. Use the exercise of writing your essay as a project to think with,

rather than as just a report on thoughts already worked out.

11. Be sure to have a distinct topic or title in mind. If your supervisor has given you a title, or choice of titles, focus your mind on the range and boundaries of the topic, what it includes and excludes, and also on what strike you as the central questions or issues which it identifies. If you are not assigned a specific title or question, invent one; and write it at the head of your essay. Keep looking back at it as you write, to hold the focus on arguing to the point, bringing your discussion round towards conclusions which will address the initial question from the vantage-point of each stage set out and worked through in the body of the essay. Try to avoid straying too far after minor points, or embarking on major arguments which belong in a different essay with a different title.

12. Many essays are blunted by wordy and strained introductions which go through elaborate scene-setting and summary overview of issues or life-and-works. Try to find a point of entry which carries you directly to a specific encounter with your text and with the start of your discussion proper, shorn of warm-up gesturings. When you start writing page 2, glance back to see if you could scrap all of page 1 and begin instead where you are now.

13. Essays do not have to be bulky and over-padded with material, especially since long essays can become meandering, lose bite and fudge issues; one well-chosen quotation making the hinge to a paragraph may do its work better than three or four which play safe with unfocussed variation. Last-minute extra thoughts sometimes do contain strokes of piercing insight, but adding a couple more pages to your essay could be expensive to its balance and composure. A skimpy or shallow essay may just betoken mental laziness or distraction, and intricate contexts sometimes need patiently teasing out; but cogent brevity is harder to achieve and requires concentrated control.

14. It is probably best to write most weekly essays by hand rather than on a word-processor, since thinking through the point of a pen is a skill important for examinations. But remember that clear well-formed handwriting is a basic necessity. No reader can follow or appreciate an argument when the ocular task of reading is itself burdensome. Cultivate a good clear hand; use a decent pen, don't scribble, set adequate margins so that your supervisor can find room to fit in a few words edgewise, number your pages clearly and don't forget to include your name somewhere up near the start. Also try not to spell badly: it makes you look stupid and uneducated. When in your second year you come to consider optionally submitting work written in your own time (e.g., a portfolio or a dissertation) as part of an examination, you will need to produce documents that are word-processed, and so by then you ought ideally to be on familiar terms with an appropriate system.

15. Neat presentation is not however an overriding virtue. As you ponder critically the sequence of sentences and paragraphs which is your essay taking shape, neat crossings out and insertions can be evidence of alert second thoughts and avoidance of trite expression, muddled syntax, cowardly evasiveness, momentary loss of connection. Sometimes a single right word is critical in its context, and to get it at second attempt is better than not getting it at all. A fault of tone can be lethal: some carelessly pretentious pronouncement can lose delicacy or finesse which may be extremely hard to

recapture. Writing at speed and thinking as you write will always throw up blemishes, and if you catch them on the wing you can often restrict the larger damage they can do. Your supervisor will prefer an active and self-revising essay, even if not yet fully clarified, to a neater and safer exercise tucked diligently into its margins.

16. Such errors and lapses of style can spoil a potentially interesting argument. Some essays settle into a drone because there is not enough variety of pace or shift of focus. Some slide into casual or chatty attempts to be familiar, others switch on the eloquence and scale giddy heights (however, the shepherds in Milton's grandly eloquent hymn 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' are described as 'chatting'). A modest witty turn may occasionally enliven a point, but facetious display quickly tires the reader; try not to fall into scoring mere hit and run points, however smart they seem at the time.

17. More dangerous because less easily noticed is a resort to tired or banal phrasing, words and phrases that just slide out of the pen before you notice how almost-trite they are. Sometimes it is good to hold on to simple, direct expression; but critical vigilance is needed to keep the sentence-by-sentence writing crisp and flexible and not to let a well-shaped opening begin to sag into stock, earnest sentiments. Try not to congratulate a major author for writing well; it will just make you look silly. Initially the best way to eliminate these weak spots is to allow a moment's pause after you finish a section and then to read back through it, listening in your mind to how it sounds and imagining yourself in the position of a friendly but alert and sceptical reader. Later you will be able to maintain these aspects of active intelligence in the pitch and turn of style during the act of first writing the essay out.

18. Working on a weekly essay is thus a good opportunity to refine and develop your own active vocabulary and to be sure that you exactly understand its potential for nuance, for shades of different meaning. It is rather easy to almost-grasp what a particular word or expression means, more or less, which mostly means less. Keep close by you an up-to-date edition of a succinct but careful dictionary; the *Concise Oxford* would do very well. When you are about to use a word from the penumbra of your confident repertory, you have three options: (a) to avoid it, because you are not quite sure how it works, (b) to use it anyway, in the heat of the moment, or (c) to look it up, size it up, and if it fits, give it a run. A good exercise here is to attempt your own lexical definition, as specifically as you can, and then to check your success against the dictionary entry: you will quite frequently be surprised.

19. Also, be curious about the habits which make up your own style of reasoning and analysis; for example, a critical vocabulary very often implicates its own preferred range of critical methods and attitudes, although it is very possible to pick up habits without recognising where they come from or how much they bring with them. Some quite ordinary-seeming words come loaded with tacit histories or have fingerprints all over them. If you are employing terms which belong for their active relevance in an earlier historical context, be sure to identify the shifts of usage part-hidden in the gap between then and now. At the same time, your own words can be kept fresh by using them freshly and alertly.

20. Grammar can sometimes be a stumbling-block, not only because of

errors or mistakes but also because your habits of sentence-construction may seem narrow and repetitious if you are not easy with a wide range of stylistic options. Watch that relative and subordinate clauses latch on to the right correlatives, and don't put in extra bits for mere balance; watch too for ambiguous structures ('Johnson wrote *Rasselas* quickly' could mean either that he wrote it immediately after his previous labours, or that the period of composition was short). Sometimes it is merely pedantic to be correct: Milton didn't 'write' *Paradise Lost*, since it was transcribed from dictation. Sentences with 'not' and 'only', or with both, are notorious for often failing to do what is precisely wanted of them.

21. Well-reasoned argument depends on flexible command of sentence forms that are not trapped in the short-term obvious, lines of assertion with only one thing to say. Just as enthusiasm can sometimes seem rather unconsidered, so irony and scepticism can often seem a lazy way of seeming sophisticated. Some anxiously balanced sentences ('sometimes', 'partly', 'to a certain extent', etc) will hover relentlessly in the effort to avoid decision; but over-insistence (as in many sentences with 'always', 'completely', 'never') can box you into a corner from which wider alternatives may become unreachable. Leave room to extend and modify your view, even to change your mind. Control of tone, and the shifts in its effect which you will need to deploy, depend ultimately on a precise but natural style in which correct grammar and accurate vocabulary work for you buoyantly and without fussiness. Some grammatical bumbles are so disabling that they will make a reader of your essay gasp with disbelief.

22. Remember too that an essay is by definition a trial or attempt, and provides opportunity to test new approaches and follow unfamiliar arguments to discover where they lead. An essay doesn't have to be definitive, or full of synthetic pious opinions you don't really hold, or defensively well-mannered. Too much use of 'I' and 'me' may suggest boastful subjectivism, but determined impersonality may just mask the same feature while making it less recognisable; likewise, cranky attitudes may just be showing off, but energy and conviction and critical candour are substantial virtues, and should not be concealed under blandness. An occasional fierce argument with your supervisor is much more useful than simpering mild-mannered nods of agreement. Some essays running into self-destruction under internal contradiction or radical incompleteness can, even so, mark important turning-points in advance of understanding.

23. Use the shape of the paragraph productively. Just as an essay has an overall task, to develop its argument by cumulative stages, so each paragraph has a place in the sequence, a local task to perform and a connection to make. If there seems no good reason why a paragraph comes where it does in the body of the essay, then it is not doing its job. Likewise, a new paragraph takes not only a link from the one before, but a furtherance of argument or demonstration. There is no point in using link expressions like 'therefore' or 'for these reasons' or 'despite such objections' if the actual reasoning is too flimsy to justify this kind of flag-waving. Amongst other link-words that can fail to connect, 'thus' and 'hence' are perhaps the most dangerous; partly because the logic of proof may be more hopeful than real, partly because they often seem pompous. Remember too that paragraphs set out the visible

stagings of the essay, giving breathing-spaces and a glimpse of the essay shape; don't go for too long without a new paragraph, and equally don't break a close link with a merely cosmetic indentation.

24. Make intelligent use of the resources of punctuation. Very long sentences can lose shape and purpose. Shorter sentences and clauses can bite deeper. Remember that current conventions have moved against double inverted commas, and use them singly except when one set encloses another (double inside). Balanced structures around semi-colons can present complex material with good control, but can also become an owlish habit. Don't go in for dashes, as a rule, or trailing full stops intended to suggest ensuing profundities not yet worked out If you are slipshod in punctuation your logic also may start to slide, and you are very likely to annoy your supervisor as he or she tries (or not) to make good the damage. Commas, the simplest pause-markers, are the hardest of all to use successfully. Frequent mistakes with apostrophe's (like this one) will make your reader wonder how you got here. Producing a successful essay does mean writing well, in addition to having good ideas.

25. Benefit from the study of examples. When you read a critical book or essay or chapter which seems to deploy distinct and admirable energies in its style of argument, take a closer look to see how it is done. When you read a muddy article or listen to a confused lecture, analyse in your mind what seems to be going wrong with it, where one weakness leads to another. Often a blurring of vocabulary is at fault, a word not quite the right word, a distinction which is not a difference, an effect which does not presume the cause assigned to it; or a failure of historical insight, assuming a current definition for an earlier concept or way of thinking. Don't be discouraged if you or your supervisor observe these flaws in your own essays: recognition is the first step towards remedy.

26. Quote economically and alertly. Unrelenting abstraction and generality diminish the sense of real contact with literature and the challenging powers of the imagination, as well as implicitly closing up historical distance between then and now. You may quote to explore issues of style or structure, or ideas or figurations, or thematic aspects or forms of linguistic daring or tenderness, but don't quote aimlessly or because it feels like time for a specimen. Remember that once you transcribe a passage into your essay the argument is subtly altered thereby; no well-chosen quotation just falls passively into the slot set up for it. Pause to read over the preceding few sentences and then the quoted passage, again, to discover new points of analysis which may supply either endorsement or qualification to your discussion. If you are quoting a critical point be sure you are fair to the larger context, and be sure to acknowledge where the point originates; and generally on the 'fair sample' and on veracity & validity you might consult Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks, 1978) (Caius Lib.: 191 GOO), pp. 125-29, 133-37.

27. Accuracy with quotations is a very distinct virtue. If you are quoting a text passage, be sure to transcribe it with complete fidelity, down to capital letters, unusual punctuation, indented verse margins, the entire original text faithfully reproduced. Set out verse as verse, not as slashed-up prose; the extra surrounding space is space for thinking with. If you do cite only a couple of lines not offset from your own discourse it is appropriate to separate

them with a space followed by an oblique forward stroke followed by another space: 'I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, / Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs' (41-2); but note that in this example the indentation of the second line here, from the margin set by the first, is lost to view: thus, better even in a brief quotation to set it out as verse:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,

Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs (41-2).

Write out citations direct from a decent edition, including line-numbers in brackets (as above), then immediately check them back; even in the heat of the moment this is a necessary prudence. Note that citations of verse or prose set out in a separate text-block do not need inverted commas, but that citations run on within your own discourse do need them (single inverted commas are usual nowadays). If the text has '&' instead of 'and', follow it. If you are using an old-spelling text it is good discipline to follow 'u' for 'v' and 'vv' for 'w', and you will of course transcribe Middle English thorn even if you shrink from 18th Century long 's'. Set out dialogue from plays or novels correctly, and don't be careless with foreign accents. On accuracy and carefulness as intrinsic intellectual values you might consult Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind; An Enquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1996) (Caius Lib.: 121 Z), pp. 98, 155, 176-80, 185, etc.

28. More generally regarding quotation: be aware of the fluctuating scale of an essay's treatment, moving from large overview to specific local text-features and then back into comparison and evaluative argument. You will need to develop your own rhythm of moving without fuss into close-up analysis, accurately and tellingly, and then back out into wide-angled discussion, then back inwards for confirmation or a turn in direction, then out again for review and more extended, inclusive appraisal. Do not allow your quoted passages to become mere snippets, because the real test of your whole writing-task lies here, in the detail: the intelligent economy of your selection and the astuteness of your links and insights. But at the same time, a fulsome string of examples deployed in self-evidence won't amount to much. Well-paced alternations of scale and focus can be the hall-mark of control and flexibility and alertness in a good essay, especially if you can manage this without glibness or laboured manoeuvre. With regular practice you will develop good instincts along these lines.

29. Important sources of accurate and highly pertinent information, often not specifically mentioned by supervisors, come in the form of dictionaries. The great *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition) is arranged on historical principles, which allows word meanings and word usages to be analysed down into their various sub-divided aspects and then traced back to specific periods, as meanings and registers shift over time. Learn how to use this complex instrument and find your way through its layout, and make a habit of running complex words through an *OED* check. Likewise Alexander Schmidt's *Shakespeare Lexicon*, as now supplemented if not replaced by David & Ben Crystal (eds), *Shakespeare's Words; A Glossary and Language Companion* (London, 2002), Sam Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary* and Craigie's *Dictionary of American English* are all major resources, as will be the *Middle English Dictionary* when it is finally completed. You will find all these works

in the Caius Library.

30. There are conventions for use in citing titles of literary works. Briefly, titles of books and works published with separate title-pages are given in italics, and italics are represented in handwritten essays by underlining. Thus, Paradise Lost, The Merchant of Venice, Middlemarch. Titles of compositions which do not and never did have separate title-pages are given in single inverted commas: thus, 'To his Coy Mistress', 'Dover Beach', 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Also, we write The Deserted Village (Goldsmith) thus because, although nowadays it is a composition included in larger collections of his work, originally it was published separately and with its own title-page.

31. It is acceptable to use some conventional tag or shortened titles for some well-known works. Milton did not write a masque titled Comus, but this abbreviated form is usual; likewise, Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode'. But take note that Shakespeare did not write Anthony and Cleopatra, any more than Blake wrote Songs of Innocence and Experience or Eliot wrote The Four Quartets. If you think such accuracy to be mere pedantry, remember this thought when in the dentist's chair you ponder the chances of the drill going into the wrong tooth.

32. Each essay however brief or humble should identify and cite correctly the edition used of the text or texts under discussion. This means that you can give identifying page-number or stanza and line references in the body of your text, for each passage referred to or quoted; for plays, act, scene and line-numbering will serve very well. When you are giving a reference to a passage in a novel which is current in many different editions it is sometimes helpful simply to put Little Dorrit, Chap. 16; but be careful, since Little Dorrit is divided into two Books each with its own chapter-numbering, so that what you mean is Book I Chap. 16, or Book 2 ditto. For a poem like Sir Gawain & The Green Knight a simple line-reference is sufficient, since modern editions are continuously line-numbered throughout.

33. At the foot of the essay, or on a separate sheet, list the texts used, briefly but correctly, and then any major historical or critical secondary works; you may wish to add the library classmark, so that you can find the book again if and when you need it. It is not usual to list reference works, like dictionaries or concordances. The form in which you present these items does not have to be hyper-sophisticated: author, title (underlined if a book, in single inverted commas if an article), editor(s) if any, then in brackets the place and date of publication. Here are a couple of examples:

Henry Fielding, The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling, ed. M.C. Battestin and F.T. Bowers (2 vols, Oxford, 1974).

R.A. McCabe, 'Conflicts of Platonic Love and Sensual Desire in Astrophil and Stella', in J. Scattergood (ed.), Literature and Learning in Medieval and Renaissance England (Dublin, 1984).

When you make a list of reading for Part I portfolio essays you will need more detailed advice, and for Dissertations a full bibliography is required; but for the run of weekly essays a simple format is quite enough.

34. Don't overlook the advantages of attention to humble chronology. When you study an author or some particular literary work, establish in your

memory a good knowledge of dates of birth and death, dates of first publication or performance, the context of his or her contemporaries, the reigning monarch or government of the day, etc. Make a regular habit of this, or otherwise you will soon start to drift in a vacuum of lofty opinions and minimal, hazy facts.

35. As you approach the conclusion of your essay, review its shape as it has evolved, look back to the title question or topic, and ask yourself where this essay has gone, how much it has accomplished. Your final paragraphs should gather the lines of argument and discussion into some focus of tentative judgement and overall outcome. Common errors here are to claim too much, too mechanically: 'Thus in conclusion it can be clearly seen ...'; or not to offer any kind of conclusion at all, but to peter out, sometimes because time and energy ran out also. Don't abandon specific content for empty rhetorical manoeuvre at the last moment. Remember too that different kinds of essay will develop and conclude differently; try to avoid regularly running the bus back into the same garage.

36. Finally, don't be intimidated by all these pedantic warning tones. It is good to write naturally and to express your opinions without too much artifice. Sophistication and elegance for their own sakes are mere distraction. Try to find where your own true responses lie, the judgements which are your own and not assumed for the sake of performance. The run of enthusiasm and fresh discovery has its own energy, and can be flattened by too much prudent interference. You may recognise that a line of argument will need to be tempered and tested, later on; but don't strangle a vivid idea at birth.

37. When your essay is done and handed in (on time, if you want it to be read beforehand) there will be discussion at the ensuing supervision, both of your points and your essay construction, and also of other points and larger issues; if other essays have been presented for the same session, there will be material also arising and maybe further reading suggested as means of testing or expanding ideas. It is reasonable occasionally to take a few quick notes during these discussions, but not so as to interrupt active participation. Try to follow up this outcome speedily, before your memory fades; add comments to your essay, work out solutions to weaknesses or confusions, correct mistakes. Keep your essays in ordered sequence, for the tasks of revision later on. You may wish to swap essays with your supervision partner(s), to share arguments and promote further productive discussion, but be sure to get them safely back.

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