**Checklist for Essay Writing**

*Do you want to do well in your essay writing?*

Your university grades are largely based on the quality of your writing. You need therefore to give your written work your very best effort. A great deal of (free) support to help you with your writing is available at QMUL: it is open to any student at any point of their undergraduate career. Many of the students who come along to talk about their writing are already skilled writers; they are interested in developing their strengths further. So please don’t be put off from coming along by thinking that your work is either too ‘bad’ or ‘good enough’ – we are all able to deepen our understanding of how we use language. Do make sure to make the most of what is on offer while you are here.

*Resources*

The SLLF Writing Centre is specifically designed to support SLLF students on Languages, Linguistics, Comparative Literature and Film programmes; [www.learningdevelopment.qmul.ac.uk](http://www.learningdevelopment.qmul.ac.uk) provides information on writing support services available in the QM Library throughout the year; the Royal Literary Fund Fellows can be consulted throughout the year as well (<http://learningdevelopment.qmul.ac.uk/appointments-rlf-fellow>).

*Advice*

You are the author of your essay, which means that you have the final responsibility for all aspects of it (content, presentation, editing). You need to leave plenty of time to plan it, write it, and edit it.Writing an essay is an exercise in sustained concentration; precision matters. This is a training for life, not just for university. Employers have made it clear that they value graduates who can write accurately and expressively.

*Practical preparation*

Please make sure that you have read the sections on essay writing and referencing in the *SLLF Undergraduate Handbook* before you start writing. Any available guidance materials for a specific assignment or module should of course also be consulted.

The SLLF marking criteria cover seven different categories. When your work is marked, you will receive feedback on all these categories via a coversheet attached to your assignment. Here are the categories, with a brief explanation of what they involve:

**Follows assignment brief**: This means:

* Answering all the issues raised by the question, within the space available;
* Showing that you understand the terms and concepts that relate to your chosen topic;
* Ensuring that your answer is squarely focused on the question, and avoiding irrelevance;
* Respecting the word limit (up to 10% excess is permissible; this includes footnotes and quotations, but excludes the bibliography).

**Knowledge/understanding**: You need to demonstrate a good understanding of your chosen material – whether it’s a film, a novel, a linguistic theory, or a historical event. This doesn’t mean mentioning facts or quoting texts for their own sake; it means taking account of these details *in a way that supports your analysis*.

In addition, it’s important to show understanding of the wider subject area. This usually means two things:

a) Contexts of different kinds, e.g. the genre of the film you’re studying, or the period in which the novel you’re studying was written.

b) Critical or theoretical perspectives, i.e. what has already been thought or written about your topic.

For both a) and b), remember to maintain relevance to the question. Contexts and critical approaches should contribute to your argument, not take it over.

**Argument/analysis**: You should develop a line of argument that takes the reader clearly from the start to the finish of your discussion, while making sure that every point you make is supported with evidence. Depending on your subject, this evidence may take different forms: quotations, references, statistics, etc. Always make clear the relationship between your evidence and the point that you’re making, by stating how the one supports the other. (Evidence can’t speak for itself.)

Analysis means *interpreting* evidence, not just presenting it. Your interpretations should, where appropriate, draw on arguments presented in the critical literature on the subject. But you shouldn’t feel obliged to agree with them – you may be able to develop a different perspective that’s supported by argument and evidence.

**Structure and organisation**: You need a clear introduction, in which you explain how you interpret the question and why it’s worth asking, indicate what issues you intend to explore and describe the structure of your argument (i.e. indicate how you will deal with each issue and in what order). Avoid using the introduction to present biographical details, summaries of texts or contextual information. These are normally redundant and take away space needed to actually answer the question.

The body of your essay, i.e. the development of your argument, must closely follow the structure described in your introduction.

Your essay must close with a strong conclusion. A good conclusion requires you to bear in mind that (1) you do not introduce any new material at that point (though it may be appropriate to acknowledge issues that couldn’t be considered for reasons of space), (2) you succinctly summarise your main points, (3) show how they relate to each other, (4) state your general conclusions and (5) make clear why they are significant (e.g. wider implications).

Effective paragraphing requires you to write one idea per paragraph; the first sentence of each paragraph (topic sentence) should establish the function of that paragraph in the argument. Clear links between paragraphs should be made in order to help the reader follow the steps of your discussion with no sense of confusion. You should make good use of signposting words throughout (firstly, secondly, finally; on the one hand, on the other; in contrast; etc).

**Written English**: spelling should be 100% accurate (foreign spelling in quotations must also be accurate); sentences must be coherent (e.g. subject and verb must agree; there should be no missing words); punctuation should be used accurately; use the present tense to discuss texts critically (‘The author argues that’); any quotation must be 100% accurate and should fit coherently into your sentence structure.

**Referencing**: you should refer to the very precise conventions set out in the *SLLF Undergraduate Handbook*. You need to follow these *exactly.* Any references made in the text of the essay should use the author/date system as set out in the *Handbook*.

**Presentation**:

* Essay pages should be numbered;
* The title should be accurately reproduced at the top of the first page;
* The text should have a minimum of 1.5-line spacing, and preferably double spacing, throughout – including the bibliography;
* It is recommended that you indent (using the tab key) the start of each new paragraph (but not the first paragraph)
* A single font should be used throughout, in at least 11 pt;
* Titles should be correctly formatted when reproduced in the body of an assignment (italics for film or book titles, single inverted commas for titles of chapters or short stories);
* Quotations should never be italicized. They should be presented in single inverted commas or, if longer than two lines, as a separate paragraph inset from the left-hand margin, without inverted commas but with an additional line space above and below;
* The bibliography should be under a separate heading (but not necessarily on a separate page) at the end of the essay.

When you submit an assignment, you need to complete a coversheet. This will help with your presentation, because the coversheet can be completed electronically, and is set up with appropriate font size, line spacing, and page numbering. You should use it as the first page of each assignment that you submit (i.e. save it under an appropriate filename and edit your assignment into it – don't paste it into another document!).

*Final stages*

It’s important to allow time for final checking. You may find it useful to print out a paper copy of your almost final draft: it is easier to spot mistakes on paper than on screen. Leave some time between writing your draft and coming back to edit it, **then read your work slowly out loud and expect to come across a mistake in every line.** Your job is to find and correct these mistakes BEFORE you hand your work in (spelling mistakes, missing words, wrong agreement of verb with subject, an incoherent sentence where the parts do not fit together, inaccurate quotation, misspelt foreign words if you are quoting in a foreign language).

Read carefully any feedback received on previous assignments and try to make sure that you are responding to it thoughtfully in writing the next one: the feedback is really more important than the mark.

Respect the deadline for submission: if your work is handed in late, unless an extension has been agreed, you will lose five marks for each 24-hour period up to seven days. Work submitted after that point will receive a mark of zero. So late submissions will significantly affect your result – it is definitely not worth throwing away precious marks.

*Any questions or want to discuss your work?* Contact Dr Kirsteen Anderson, SLLF Writing Support Mentor, on k.h.r.anderson@qmul.ac.uk