Student essays: some guidance notes

This document contains some guidance on the expected quality of the essays. You should read this in conjunction with the general notes entitled “Thoughts on technical writing” (TOTW); this document is specific to this essay, but Thoughts on technical writing will be appropriate for all writing you do as a student and possibly beyond.

1. Title

You need to create an appropriate title for your essay. The titles given in the original sheet are very broad, and you may have decided to write an essay around one aspect of the theme. Thus you should consider creating a title that properly describes what the reader might expect to find within the essay. For example, if you have chosen to write on one of the biographical themes but focus on only a certain period of that person's life, then your title should reflect this. For example, should anyone have been chosen to write my biography but focussed only on my time in Queen Mary, the title could be something like “Martin Dove, the Queen Mary Years: 2011–2016”.

2. Structure of the essay

The essay should follow a logical sequence, beginning with an introduction and ending with a summary or conclusion. You should know exactly what point you are trying to make, and structure the essay in a way that brings out this point most clearly. Avoid unnecessary asides because these can be more of a distraction.

Sometimes the use of headings can help create a structure, presenting a guide to the reader as well as a restraint on the author. For an essay of 2500–3000 words, probably only Level A headings are appropriate (see TOTW for a discussion on headings).

3. Standard of prose

It goes without saying that we expect a high quality of prose. Take it seriously when your word processor queries your spelling and grammar! The document TOTW will give you some general pointers concerning the style of prose. It is the author's responsibility to ensure that the essay reads well; it is often advisable to ask someone else to read it before you consider it to be finished, and to take their comments seriously.

4. Diagrams

Ideally we would prefer you to construct your own diagrams, but we understand that there is a good chance that you do not have the software required to do this. If you do take a figure from another source, then your figure caption should give full credit, usually by a sentence that begins “Figure was taken from …”, where you can give the explicit reference, or else give a reference number (see below).

Whether you construct your own figure or take one from another source, there are some rules to follow. The obvious one is that the figure should be legible, but being obvious doesn’t mean that people stick to this rule even in scientific publications. One key to legibility is to make the text such as the scale and titles of axes large enough to be read when the figure is in place. Do not use bold text, and make all text the same font style and size. Note that the default settings on Microsoft Excel are actually a very poor guide, and usually this software
produces text that is far too small for professional use. Another cause of illegibility is the pixel resolution of the image. Many graphics on the web have a resolution that is fine for a computer screen but which is too poor for printing. Screen resolution might be 72 pixels per inch, but for printed work the ideal is 300 pixels per inch. If your resolution is too low, the text will be illegible. Avoid completely any image that displays text but which is compressed in the JPEG format. When printed you will find too many ghost images appearing in the final diagram; JPEG is great for photographs, but horrible for line art. Simply saving a JPEG format in another format will not fix this problem; make sure that the JPEG compression is not present anywhere within your workflow.

All diagrams need a good caption. The caption should start with the figure number. The caption should describe what is in the figure and what you want the reader to learn from the figure.

Make sure your figures are displayed in the order in which they are cited in the text and close to the first citation.

5. Tables

Tables are an alternative to figures in certain cases, usually when you would like the reader to be able to extract exact information. For example, if you present data that you would like the readers to be able to use for themselves, a table is ideal. However, a table has far less visual impact than a well-designed figure (for example, a graph, bar chart or pie chart) and should only be used when necessary.

As for figures, a table should have a good caption, again making clear to the reader the message that you as the writer want to be taken from the table. Merely providing a table in case it might be of interest is a good reason not to include it!

6. References and bibliography

All your work should have proper references, with a list of cited works at the end. There are two main styles of references. The Vancouver system has references ordered by number (in sequence of citation) with that number displayed in the text at the appropriate point, and the Harvard system has references ordered alphabetically by author list and chronologically when an author list has more than one paper. In the Harvard system, the author and year is given in the text. Examples of citing in the Vancouver system [1] and Harvard system (Smith 2014) are given in this sentence. In the reference list, ideally list the authors, title of the article, and publication details (journal, volume number, page numbers and year). Each journal has its own style, and you should create your own consistent style based on your observation from research papers you read for your essay.

Where you make mention in the text of something from the web, give the title of the article and its URL, and state the date of last access. Web references are far from ideal because of the volatility of the web (pages change often or are deleted), but are sometimes inevitable.

Sometimes you have been helped by a more general reference (such as a book) where this has helped your learning but where you have no need to cite something specific. In this case you can use a separate bibliography, where you list all the books or other resources separately under a Bibliography title. This is not often seen in scientific papers (it is more common in the humanities), but may be found in some books.