

ESSAY WRITING TECHNIQUES

Style & Grammar

Write in short clear sentences and read your work out loud to ascertain whether what you have said a) makes sense, b) reads properly.

Check the meanings of words in dictionaries - many students use words in the wrong context with the wrong prepositions.

Always use the past tense in history essays. Generally you should use the simple perfect rather than the past continuous or pluperfect. i.e 'they went' rather than 'they were going' or 'they had gone'.

Avoid colloquialisms such as 'a lot', 'clout', 'savvy'.

Avoid excessive use of capital letters. There is no reason for ordinary nouns like caliph to have a capital letter unless you are referring to a specific caliph in the form 'Caliph Umar'.

Transliterations from foreign languages should be italicised and in Middle Eastern Studies it is preferable that you indicate 'ayn and hamza with a comma. The *Index Islamicus* or *Encyclopedia of Islam* provide transliteration systems in their first pages. Choose one and follow it consistently. If you are in East Asian Studies, ask your supervisor for their preference in dealing with transliterations.

Content

Answer the question! Do not simply put down everything you know about the period, theme or institutions mentioned in the question. Think about what the question is asking and angle your material appropriately.

Argument and planning

A good essay will have a clear argument that directly addresses the question and has been informed by your reading. This requires good planning so that you can make sense of what you have read and then divide up your ideas into points. Your argument could then be your main point that you feel answers the question and the body of the essay would comprise maybe three or 4 points - a paragraph or two each - developing and supporting your main point. Each point should be based on evidence from your reading which should be analysed in terms that are relevant to the smaller point being made in the paragraph and the larger point that answers the question. Quality of points - e.g. their analysis or their interconnections - is more important than quantity of points and is what raises the level of an essay. The introduction and conclusion should sandwich these points. The introduction ideally would address the question and introduce the main point that you will argue. It should be brief as your smaller points will do the work of filling out your answer. The conclusion should in some way round up your argument and restate your position. It could add a new element to what you have stated in the introduction - perhaps identifying a tension in the question that is reflected in your smaller points or something in your argument that you think makes your main point particularly strong or important.

Bibliographic Conventions

Each Termtime essay should have a bibliography with items cited in the following way:

- a) Books: Other, A. N., *History of the Muslim World*, Place: Publisher, date.
- b) Articles: Other, A. N., "Nature and Nurture on Imperial China's Frontiers". In *Modern Asian Studies*, Place: Publisher, date, pp.245-267.

If you mention a point from a book or article in your essay you must insert a reference either in the form of a footnote or a bracket in the text

- a) Footnote: Other, A. N., *History of the Muslim World*, Place: Publisher, date, p.?
- b) (Other, date: p.)

Plagiarism

It is plagiarism to repeat an author's point word for word or in a close paraphrase without putting in a footnote showing where that point/idea came from. Occasionally, people do cheat and try to pass off others' work as their own but often plagiarism occurs accidentally when students fail to acknowledge where their materials come from. Never copy and paste directly from online resources, make your own notes and then reword things in your own way and if you do want to paraphrase or quote - which can greatly improve essays - then put in a footnote stating where you got the information in the form described above. The Faculty has a policy about plagiarism which you can read on the Faculty website.