

Guide to Writing an Essay in Art History and Theory

Introduction

This guide is intended to help you in writing university-level essays in Art History and Theory. It is recommended that you read the whole guide, particularly if you are just at the beginning your university studies. The guide should help you gain a general insight into writing university essays and an awareness of strategies that will enable you to develop your skills in writing. The guide can also be used as a reference tool to be consulted when you want help with specific points.

Note that this guide is only a guide. Don't hesitate to ask your lecturer or tutor if there are specific requirements for the essay you have been set or if you want further advice.

General introductory points

An essay should be *your* argument or interpretation about a particular topic or issue. It is also part of the process of learning about a subject.

You are expected to state your argument or interpretation and then to support and elaborate it. Note that your response may be as much about raising questions as providing answers.

Perhaps the most important factor to remember is that it *takes time* to write a good essay, not only to research and write the essay but to *think* about your response to the question or topic.

An essay must also be more than a patchwork of quotes, paraphrases and thoughts or facts you have assembled. It must have a structure which is appropriate to conveying your argument.

Do not forget that plagiarism (taking someone else's ideas as if they were one's own) is not acceptable. Readers and markers do not expect you to come up with new facts but they do want to get a sense of the way you are thinking through a particular question or issue and your ability to think critically for yourself about the various materials and sources you are engaging with.

How to approach your essay

1. Examine the question or theme

It is crucial you answer the question and understand its scope and implications: i.e. what is being asked of you, and how you might deal with the issues/tasks that the question or topic requires (e.g. the kind of visual analysis you may need to do, the kind of research that is necessary to answer the question well).

2. Preparation and research

(a) Basic material and preparation

Consider the object(s) you will be focusing on in your essay (i.e. the specific artworks, visual artefacts or texts you will be dealing with). Keep in mind that you will need to develop a response to these objects that goes beyond mere description, so start to think about these objects and how you might engage with them in your writing.

Things to consider might include the form, composition, subject matter, etc. etc. Ask yourself: what are the *effects* of the things you have noted about the work(s) you are dealing with? If you are focusing on written texts, what makes the author's approach or writing distinctive and different?

Keep looking at and considering the objects of your essay throughout the writing process – your response to your material is of prime importance.

(b) Research

Aim to get a general view of the topic through reading a reputable survey or general text, then move to more specific study, i.e. specialised books and articles.

Use your course reading-list as a preliminary guide but note you may need to find further sources. Some useful ways to further your research include:

- keyword and subject searches in the UC Library catalogue
- searches of electronic journals and databases available on the Library website
- following up references given in key texts you are already familiar with (e.g. bibliographies at the end of texts in your course list)
- asking your lecturer, tutor or librarian for further recommendations or research options

Note: Be careful (and sparing) with internet sources. The sources you use should be reputable and reliable. Avoid using internet sources which have no academic or sound institutional affiliations as authoritative information sources. In such cases there is no guarantee that the information you are using is accurate.

3. Reading and note-taking

Read and take notes on the material you have gathered. People have their own systems of note-taking, but ensure you keep records of precise references as you go. Do not simply copy out long passages but try instead to sift and synthesise. Express in your own words what you think the important points are.

Focus on recording:

- what arguments are being made and *how* the writer develops such arguments
- useful factual material;
- useful quotations.

Take your time and think about the ideas you are encountering.

Writing your essay

For many people, writing an essay consists of two stages:

1. writing to work out what you want to say, i.e. preliminary drafts and planning
2. writing to communicate what you want to say to others i.e. further drafts and final text.

You will find that you clarify your ideas as you write.

1. Preliminary drafts/planning

1. Think out the essay question in the light of your preparation and your response to your reading and research.
2. Write a plan as a guide. For example, list the key points you want to get across and start to assemble further material to support these points. Note that your plan will probably change as your essay progresses. At this stage don't worry too much about written expression. Focus on the basic ideas and argument and how it can be developed.

2. Re-writing the draft

The re-writing stage is generally about making the ideas you worked out in your rough draft clearer, more developed, and expressed in a form which communicates well to your reader. Sometimes you'll need to reorganise the material (e.g. bringing key points in your conclusion back to your introduction).

If you can, try to leave the draft for a time after you finish it, then come back to it with a fresh mind and examine it critically. Ask yourself questions such as:

- What have I said?
- Is what I have said clearly expressed?
- Have I used evidence / argumentation to support my views?
- Have I dealt with the main issues?
- Have I given the reader a sense that I am aware of different perspectives on this topic and that I have thought critically and come to my own conclusions about them?

At this stage, you may find you need to clarify certain points. When revising your essay, also remember that the only facts that are useful are those which support your basic argument or reasoning. Do not put in facts just for the sake of it. Brief contextualisation of an artist may be useful, particularly when the artist is not well-known, but avoid the common error of giving biographies of artists you are discussing as this is usually irrelevant. Unless you can show the relevance of such facts, cut them out.

Check back over your notes and identify where you need footnotes and references.

Remember, finally:

- the essay should be a **clear** statement of your 'take' on the issues raised in the question
- the body of the essay should amplify, back up and elaborate your basic argument or interpretation of the issues

- there should be a conclusion summarising the arguments you have made.

Documentation, footnoting and other technicalities

Documentation, footnoting and other such ‘technicalities’ are not arbitrary requirements, but matters which can help you in communicating your ideas to your reader. This section spells out recommendations for the ‘apparatus’ of essay writing (footnotes, bibliography, etc.). You do not have to accord in every particular with these guidelines, but whatever you do you must be *consistent* and *clear*. The basic rule is to use these devices as an aid to your reader, i.e. providing additional information, indicating sources, etc.

Form and expression

The essay should be presented as a continuous argument, not in note form. In short essays some students may find the use of a few sub-headings a useful way to structure their response to a given topic, but a lot of sub-headings can be distracting and can often lead you to oversimplify your argument. Your argument should have its own shape. Paragraphs should help the reader by showing how you develop major themes from groups of sentences dealing with specific aspects of that theme.

The argument should be clearly presented. Remember that the rules of grammar and punctuation are not inconvenient extras but vital to the clear expression of a thought. For example, if a verb does not agree with its subject, your reader may easily get confused. Poor grammar and punctuation make your ideas and arguments more difficult for the reader to follow.

Remember that if your marker has to correct a lot of basic grammatical and spelling errors, he/she may be less likely to be convinced by what you are saying.

Avoid empty phrases. Ask yourself: what are these words saying?

Titles

Underline or italicise titles of works of art (but not buildings), books, and titles of periodical publications. Use single quotation marks for articles, chapter headings from books, unpublished material and theses.

Quotations

Quotations of up to three lines should not be separated from the main text. They should be indicated by single quotation marks. For matter quoted within a quotation, double quotation marks should be used.

Quotations of three or more lines should be separated with one line space from preceding and following text and indented (in single-space if your essay is double-spaced). In such cases, do **not** use quotation marks. For example:

As Tapati Guha-Thakurta observes:

Archeological writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century would keep resorting to the theme of Muslim destruction as a prime rhetorical device. It became the main trope with which to assert the power of their new restorative exercise and their new claims to the custodianship of monuments.¹

In fact, there were occasional instances where a reading of the mediaeval past led to physical interventions on its traces.

Non-sexist language

It is now usually felt that the use of a male form (e.g. 'man', 'he', 'him') is not acceptable for contexts that are not meant to be gender-specific. You can generally find alternatives to these usages that do not exclude women. Alternatives to the normative use of 'he' include 's/he' and 'he or she'. Sometimes a plural subject (e.g. 'Artists...; they...' instead of 'The artist...; he...') offers another alternative.

Foreign names and words

Phrases or technical terms in a foreign language *should* be given in italics.

Foreign personal names and foreign place names should *not* be given in italics.

The order of foreign personal names (e.g. Japanese names) must be *consistent*. If using the Western order (i.e. given name followed by family name) keep to this throughout the essay. The same applies if you decide to use the foreign-language order.

Words and phrases anglicised by common usage (e.g. *plein-air*, *par excellence*) do not need to be italicised. Maori words are not italicised in New Zealand English.

Dates

Spell out in full, in lower case, the names of centuries, e.g., eighteenth century. When the term is used as an adjective a hyphen should be inserted, thus: in the eighteenth-century manner. Particular dates should be given in this form: 8 February 2005.

Ellipses

Ellipses should be represented by three dots with no space on either side: e.g., 'that...painting'. Only use square brackets outside ellipses when modifying a quotation. For example: According to Johnston, 'Mondrian's work was [...] never entirely abstract.'

Measurements and numerals

It is preferable where possible to give measurements in metric form (e.g. centimetres, metres, kilograms) rather than non-metric form (e.g. inches, pounds).

In general, write numbers as words from one to nine. Some writers also write out numbers up to twenty and most 'round' numbers thereafter (e.g. thirty, one hundred, two thousand). Centuries should be written out (the twentieth century, the eleventh century).

Illustrations

It can be useful to include illustrations when you are not sure whether the images in question are known to your reader/marker, or when you are analysing particular images closely. (Note, however, that you won't get extra marks for lots of illustrations; it's not a high school project.)

In the text illustrations should be referred to thus: (fig. 1) or (figs. 1, 2). Provide details of images reproduced either below the illustration itself or as a separate list.

For paintings, sculptures, and most forms of visual art (but *not* buildings), the caption should follow the following basic form, although in some contexts name, title and year may be enough.

fig. x. Name of artist (where applicable)
title of work, year work was made
 medium and support (where applicable)
 size in centimetres (height followed by width)
 collection, location

For example:

1. Agnes Martin, *Night Sea*, 1963, oil and gold leaf on canvas, 183 x 183 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
7. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Pine Tree Landscape*, 2001, silver gelatin print, six parts, overall dimensions 182 x 750 cm. Private collection, Hong Kong.
9. *Farnese Hercules*, Graeco-Roman, date unknown (perhaps early third century C.E., copy of a Greek original of fourth century B.C.E.), marble, height 317 cm. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.

For buildings, the form is as follows (although in some cases you may wish to include further information):

Architect
 Name of building (not italicised or underlined)
 Location
 Date

For example:

4. Frank Gehry, Nationale-Nederlanden building, Prague, 1992-1996.

or (more complex):

7. Kodo (Lecture Hall) of Toshodaiji, c. 748. Moved to present site in 760, remodelled in 1275 and 1675. Length: 33.8 m. Nara.

Note that with some illustrations, a less formalised form of captioning is more suitable.

For example:

5. Susanne Woivire sitting on the hamlet plaza at Saraisese, holding a *qana hunhuni* on her head. Longana, east Ambae, 22 May 1992. Photo L. Bolton.

It is often useful to indicate the source of your illustration, particularly if it is obscure.

Footnotes/endnotes

Notes may be placed at the foot of the page (footnotes) or at the end of an essay (notes or endnotes). When to use footnotes (or endnotes) is a question of judgement. As a

general rule you need to use them to indicate: the sources of facts not generally known or agreed on, particular approaches, judgements or interpretations made by others, and quotations. It is not necessary to footnote facts that are generally known.

Footnotes or endnotes need to be numbered consecutively and superscripted.

The form of footnote/endnote references should be as follows:

Books

Given name and surname of author, *Full Title of Book*, place of publication (English form, e.g., Munich not Munchen), publisher, date of publication, page no. or nos. (e.g. p. xx; pp. xx-xx; pp. xx ff.).

Note: p. x = one page (e.g. p. 4)

pp. x-xx = more than one page (e.g. pp. 9-12; pp. 234-250)

ff. = and subsequent pages.

For example:

2. Ludmilla Vachtova, *Frank Kupka*, London, Phaidon, 1995, pp. 13-19.

3. Ian Lochhead, *The Spectator and the Landscape in the Art Criticism of Diderot and his Contemporaries*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1982, p. 90.

NB: For citations of exhibition catalogues, use the phrase 'exh. cat.' after the title. You may find that there is no specific author given for some exhibition catalogues. If so, leave out the author reference, but include the name of the museum or gallery where the exhibition was held as part of the publication details in your reference.

Periodical sources

Name and surname of author, 'Full title of article', *Full Title of Periodical*, vol. (where applicable), no., date, page no./s of the article, or page no./s relating to this reference.

For example:

3. Jillian Cassidy, 'Eileen Mayo and the British Wood-Engraving Tradition', *Bulletin of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery*, no. 90, June 1994, pp. 3-4.

4. Joseph Leo Koerner, 'Borrowed Sight: The Halted Traveller in Caspar David Friedrich and William Wordsworth', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 20, no. 2, April-June 1985, pp. 149-163.

For references to articles in anthologies, combine the forms above.

Once a work has been fully identified, later references should be given in shortened form by the author's name followed by a short form of the title and with page references given subsequently.

For example: 7. Vachtova, *Frank Kupka*, pp. 34-36.

The abbreviation 'ibid.' (meaning 'in the same place') can be used when references to the same source follow one another. Use 'Ibid.' for references to the same text and same page, and 'Ibid., p. x.' [or 'Ibid., pp. x-x.'] for references to the same text but different pages.

For example: Ibid. (= same text, same page)
Ibid., p. 5. (= same text, different page)

Other Latin abbreviations such as *op. cit.*, *idem.*, and *loc. cit.* are now rarely used.

Note: The general rule is that *parts* of larger wholes (e.g. articles in journals, chapters in books, poems in collections of poems) are cited *in quotation marks*, whereas '*whole*' texts (e.g. books, artworks other than buildings) are cited *in italics* or underlined.

Bibliography

This should contain a list of the works you have read in the preparation of your essay (except for very general references such as encyclopedias and dictionaries, unless they are crucial to the substance of your essay).

A bibliography should be set out in alphabetical order. The material and form of bibliographic references are the same as those for footnotes/endnotes with one exception: since the list is alphabetical, the surname of the author precedes his/her given name or initials. Also, page references are not necessary except for chapters and journal articles, where it is good to provide details of the pages within the periodical or book where the article/chapter is to be found.

How to avoid common problems and errors in student writing

Correct grammar, punctuation and syntax help with the clear and effective expression of ideas, so you need to pay close attention to getting these things right. Certain errors in writing are very common. Below you will find examples of some of the most common errors, together with examples of correct usage and the rule which governs these cases.

1. Many students incorrectly put commas between the subject and predicate (i.e. verb + object) of a sentence.

Wrong: The photograph, is now in Te Papa.

Right: The photograph is now in Te Papa.

More complex:

Wrong: The photograph that I have been discussing, is now in Te Papa.

Right: The photograph that I have been discussing is now in Te Papa.

2. If the sentence you are writing has an independent clause (a clause with a subject and predicate) and a dependent clause (a clause without its own subject), then no comma goes between independent and dependent clauses.

Wrong: The exhibition is now on at Te Papa, and will be concluding its run soon.

Right: The exhibition is now on at Te Papa and will be concluding its run soon.

3. If the sentence you are writing has two independent clauses, insert a comma before the conjunction that joins them.

Wrong: The exhibition is now on at Te Papa and it will be concluding its run soon.

Right: The exhibition is now on at Te Papa, and it will be concluding its run soon.

4. If you are writing a sentence with two independent clauses, one of which has a dependent clause, then insert a semi-colon before the conjunction that joins them.

Wrong: The exhibition, which includes over a hundred artworks, is now on at Te Papa and it will be concluding its run soon.

Right: The exhibition, which includes over a hundred artworks, is now on at Te Papa; and it will be concluding its run soon.

5. If you are writing a sentence with two independent clauses and no conjunction joining them but one that is implied, then insert a semi-colon between the clauses.

For example: The exhibition is now on at Te Papa; its run will finish soon.

6. Students often use a semi-colon where a colon is called for. For example, the colon precedes a list of elements.

Wrong: Caravaggio's *The Death of the Virgin* has typical Baroque features; strong light-dark contrasts, vivid colour and a relatively shallow pictorial space.

Right: Caravaggio's *The Death of the Virgin* has typical Baroque features: strong light-dark contrasts, vivid colour and a relatively shallow pictorial space.

7. Students often tend to use long, complicated sentences. In general it is best to keep sentences short and simple.

8. A common error is the incorrect use of only one comma where a pair is called for. Commas often go together. It is usually the case that when one uses the commas with a dependent clause beginning with 'which' or similar words, symmetrical commas before the first word of the dependent clause and at the end of the dependent clause are required.

Wrong: The work we are considering today, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is seen by some writers as initiating a new phase in the history of modern art.

Right: The work we are considering today, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, is seen by some writers as initiating a new phase in the history of modern art.

Wrong: The exhibition, which is on at Te Papa now will be over soon.

Right: The exhibition, which is on at Te Papa now, will be over soon.

9. Another common error is that of incorrectly placing a comma before brackets when it should go after them. Be alert to this.

Wrong: Marcel Duchamp's ready made, *Fountain*, (1917) was excluded from the Society of Independent Artists' inaugural exhibition.

Right: Marcel Duchamp's ready made, *Fountain* (1917), was excluded from the Society of Independent Artists' inaugural exhibition.

Wrong: Duchamp's submission, *Fountain*, (a porcelain urinal which he purchased at a New York plumbing store) was rejected by the Society of Independent Artists.

Right: Duchamp's submission, *Fountain* (a porcelain urinal which he purchased at a New York plumbing store), was rejected by the Society of Independent Artists.

10. If you have an independent clause inside brackets, the sentence which it concludes (if it is positioned at the end of a sentence) will have its full stop before the bracket; and the clause within the brackets will have its full stop inside the brackets. No full stop is inserted after the close-bracket.

Wrong: The exhibition, which is on at Te Papa now, is finishing its run soon (Be sure to see it).

Right: The exhibition, which is on at Te Papa now, is finishing its run soon. (Be sure to see it.)

11. Students often use commas where the dash would serve better to isolate and emphasise the words.

For example:

Unclear: Curiously, the artist excluded from the exhibition, Marcel Duchamp, regarded by many art historians as one of most important artists of the twentieth century, spent most of the last years of his life playing chess.

Clear: Curiously, the artist excluded from the exhibition, Marcel Duchamp – regarded by many art historians as one of most important artists of the twentieth century – spent most of the last years of his life playing chess.

12. A common error is to have a plural subject and a singular verb (and vice versa).

Wrong: The exhibition and its curator is in town now.

Right: The exhibition and its curator are in town now.

13. Another mode of punctuation commonly misused is the apostrophe. First, the apostrophe must be used to form the possessive:

Wrong: Jasper Johns painting, *Flag*, changed the direction of postwar abstract painting in the United States.

Right: Jasper Johns' painting, *Flag*, changed the direction of postwar abstract painting in the United States.

or: Jasper Johns's painting, *Flag*, changed the direction of postwar abstract painting in the United States.

Second, be alert to the mistake of putting the apostrophe before the *s* when the proper name ends with an *s*. If you make this mistake, you change the proper name!

Wrong: Jasper John's painting

Right: Jasper Johns' painting

or Jasper Johns's painting

Also watch out for the grocer's apostrophe, that is, the use of the apostrophe where one is not called for, including using an apostrophe to form a plural noun.

Wrong: The pizza's are ready.

Right: The pizzas are ready.

14. Students sometimes write non-sentences, that is, incomplete sentences – sentences that lack a subject or a verb. Often the problem with the verb is that it is in the participial form, for example, 'being' or 'being that'.

Wrong: The most famous of Leonardo da Vinci's paintings being his *Mona Lisa*.

Right: The most famous of Leonardo da Vinci's paintings is his *Mona Lisa*.

or:

Wrong: Being that Van Gogh is one of the most popular artists of all time, any exhibition of his work will attract many thousands of visitors.

Right: Since Van Gogh is one of the most popular artists of all time, any exhibition of his work will attract many thousands of visitors.

15. Be careful not to use a dangling participle or one which modifies the wrong subject.

Wrong: Painting in the 1960s, art historians face difficult problems in reconstructing the career of Morris Louis.

Right: Morris Louis, who painted in the 1960s, poses problems for art historians seeking to reconstruct his career.

17. Learn the difference between *its* and *it's* (and *whose* and *who's*). The former – *its* – is a possessive form, e.g., *its handle was broken*. The latter – *it's* – is the contraction of *it is*, (as well as *it has*) e.g., *it's great to see you*, or *it's been great to see you*. The same pattern is followed with *whose/who's* (i.e. the former is a possessive and the latter a contraction).

18. Watch out for the use of the objective case pronoun where the nominative case pronoun is called for.

Wrong: Her and her interpreter came to the opening.

Right: She and her interpreter came to the opening.

19. While commas are sometimes very useful in clarifying meaning, avoid choking your writing with needless commas. A comma is not determined by one's breathing pattern.

20. Aim for as much precision as possible in your articulation. When you use words like 'they' and 'it', make sure that what they refer to is clear.

21. Always state within the body of the text the name of the author you are quoting, for example: *As Gertrude Stein writes, '...'* Never construct a sentence only of a quotation. Always footnote publication details.

22. Always state **within** the body of the text the name of any author whose ideas you are paraphrasing, alluding to or otherwise drawing upon. A footnote number is not good enough as it makes it impossible to identify what comes from the source and what comes from you. Try to distinguish your ideas from those of your sources.

23. Always give the full name of the author the first time you refer to him/her.

24. The titles of artworks, like the titles of journals and books, are underlined (or italicised), not put in quotation marks. The titles of articles are placed in quotation marks. When underlining or italicising, underline or italicise only the title. For example:

Wrong: Guernica's frenetic figuration seems to sweep up the viewer within it.

Right: *Guernica's* frenetic figuration seems to sweep up the viewer within it.

25. Do not fall into popular 'art book' language or the effusive, over-written style of some forms of art writing (e.g. 'The great Leonardo painted this inspiring work in 1504').

26. Watch out for common spelling/grammatical *errors* such as: *seperate*, *truely*, *its* for *it's*, *your* for *you're*, *their* for *there*, *who's* for *whose*, *women* (plural) for *woman* (singular), *criteria* (plural) for *criterion* (singular), *phenomena* (plural) for *phenomenon* (singular), *like* where *as* is correct, *in regards to* for *in regard to*, *alot* for *a lot*, *infact* for *in fact*.

27. Remember: simple expository writing is best.

Assignment presentation and submission

Your assignment should be placed in the Essay Box outside the School of Humanities Office, Level Four of the History Building, marked with the appropriate course code and lecturer's name. It is a good idea to include a cover sheet with your essay, providing course details along with your name, student number, and details of the essay question or topic.

Make a copy of your assignment before handing it in.

Essays should be typed wherever possible. Use double spacing and leave adequate margins for the marker's comments. If the assignment is handwritten, please write legibly and only on one side of the page.

Please ensure that you number every page.

Place your name in the top right-hand corner of every page in case pages come loose.

Ensure your footnotes are numbered consecutively and are placed at the bottom of each page or as endnotes at the end of the assignment.

Remember to include your bibliography at the end of the essay.

Unless you are submitting a thesis, do not place your assignment in any form of binder, manuscript pouch or folder. Stapling the pages together is an adequate method of presentation.

Your readers/markers

Your marker will set out to evaluate your essay in its own terms, that is, in terms of the propositions you make and the way you handle the material you are drawing upon to argue these propositions. Although it may be tempting to 'slant' your essay to the particular ideas you may think the marker holds, it is better not to try to do this. Most markers will be more interested in an essay that clearly develops the writer's own ideas than one which they feel has been slanted to their views.

In general your markers will value work which evidences some or all of the following:

- good writing skills
- clear, coherent structure
- strong argumentation
- good research
- strong visual analysis
- a strong understanding of the topic and concepts under consideration
- critical judgement (including critical use of sources)
- originality.

Other resources for essay-writing

Chicago Manual of Style (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, recent editions).

Gibaldi, Joseph, and Walter S. Achtert. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, (2nd ed. New York, The Modern Language Association of America, 1984) for rules relating to punctuation, footnoting, preparing the bibliography, etc.

Turabian, Kate. *Student's Guide for Writing College Papers* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976 and later editions)

Acknowledgements

This guide draws from the following sources: *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 'Guidelines for Contributors', Alan Cholodenko, 'Common Writing Problems for Film Students', University of Sydney Art History and Theory writing guide, and University of Canterbury Art History 'Guide for the Documentation of Essays'.