

Writing Essays for Psychology MScs

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This is a brief guide to essay writing, originally written for the the MSc Psycholinguistics Handbook.¹ Section 2 covers the issues in writing an argumentative essay. Section 3 covers the format requirements for essays submitted to Psychology; although these requirements are unlikely to differ substantially from course to course, it is your responsibility to check with the appropriate Module Conveners that other formatting conventions do not apply. In the *Taught Masters Handbook* you can find detailed information on the marking scheme used throughout the course.

1 Choosing a Topic

In general, the choice of an essay topic will not be dependent on an understanding of all topics covered by the classwork of a given module: whereas each module is designed to give you an overview of a particular area, in the essay you are expected to demonstrate a detailed knowledge of theoretical (and possibly methodological) issues concerning a topic of your choice. This will allow you to go into much greater depth than is possible during classes, and your essay will, of necessity, cover areas which are not explicitly addressed by the course material.

To select a topic, you should normally begin with a vague idea of a topic that is of interest to you, and find some relevant material to read. Once you are starting to become familiar with the relevant literature, you should be able to generate the core thesis of your essay (this might be a claim about the subject, or a question that has provoked debate in the literature, for example). You should be able to summarise the thesis into a couple of sentences (beginning *What my essay is about is...*). With a little further reading, you should be able to refine your thesis and choose an essay title.

During this process, you should feel free to consult your Module Convener, who will normally be able to point you in the direction of relevant literature, or help you refine the question that you aim to address in the essay.

Sources of Information

A prime consideration in essay-writing is that of how to obtain relevant information. Clearly the libraries (see section ??) are the most essential resource, and your module organiser should be able to point you at readings relevant to your topic of interest. However, you should also have the skills to search for information yourself (module organisers don't know everything;

¹Parts of this document have been compiled from documents originally written by Marielle Lange, Mits Ota, and Sue Widdicombe.

nor will they be impressed if you've simply read and regurgitated what they've suggested). Two primary sources of relevant information which the University subscribes to are *Web of Knowledge* (<http://wok.mimas.ac.uk/>) and *PsycInfo* (see <http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/resources/databases/Quickstarts/PSYCHINFO.pdf>). These are searchable databases of journal articles (Web of Knowledge) and other printed material (PsycInfo), which should make the task of finding relevant literature much easier. You should take some time to ensure that you become familiar with them.

Many recent journal articles, including those from journals published by the APA, are available electronically to users at Edinburgh University. To find these, go to the library website (<http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/>) and select 'electronic journals'.

2 Writing Argumentative Essays

Once you have chosen a topic, you should produce an argumentative essay of 3,000 words. This section contains basic advice on writing argumentative essays, which may be of use if you come from a more technical background.

Organisation

Essays should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The introduction should rehearse the issues raised by the title; the main body of the essay should take these issues one by one, discussing and illustrating them; the conclusion will pull together the various strands of argument and contain a final and extended statement of your position on the topic addressed.

You should ensure that paragraphs contain ideas, theories, and experiments which make sense when considered together—don't scatter them through the essay as you remember them or come across them. Although there are of course exceptions to every rule, a good essay will rarely address a topic by considering relevant literature in chronological order.

Style

The language of the essay should be scientific, but this does not mean that it should be written in a high-flown manner which doesn't come naturally to you (on the other hand, you shouldn't resort to slang). The target audience for your essay is the "intelligent layperson"—ideally, anyone should be able to follow your ideas and arguments. If you don't think they would be able to, it could be the case that *your* understanding of the issues is at fault—time for a re-think?

Essays are not formally penalised for minor grammatical errors. However, poor grammar can affect your mark in 2 ways:

1. if the grammar renders a section incomprehensible, then the marker must assume you don't know the correct story;
2. a continuous series of grammatical errors, which the marker has to waste time deciphering and correcting, will produce a feeling of irritation (quite rightly) and this will affect the final mark (again, quite rightly).

It is clearly to your advantage, therefore, to proof-read and spellcheck your essays before submission.

Quality

Your marker will be trying to find evidence of an interested, enquiring mind, a scientific/scholarly approach, logical and consistent presentation, and adequate reading around the subject. High marks will go to those who show an awareness of alternative experiments, theories, and authorities, as well as those who are clearly thinking for themselves.

An essay will generally gain a high mark if it:

- is logically structured;
- presents a clear and sustained argument;
- demonstrates an authoritative understanding of conceptual and factual material;
- moves beyond basic subject matter to consider complexities;
- demonstrates an ability to synthesise material effectively;
- shows evidence of independent insight;
- is well presented and adequately formatted.

The following list of dos and don'ts may also be useful when preparing written coursework:

Do

- Make your work as accessible and easy to read as possible. For instance, use plenty of 'signposts': section headings, overviews, previews, summaries, well-labelled figures or tables, etc.
- Observe the normal academic conventions. Acknowledge sources, including page numbers where appropriate. Include a properly set out list of references restricted to items actually cited in your text.
- Bear in mind that your readers have to get through a fairly large number of projects on similar topics. Make sure you describe your aims and objectives clearly at the beginning and bring the work to a close efficiently at the end.

Don't

- Don't swamp the reader with everything you know.
- Don't simply summarise what you have read or what you have heard. Regurgitation (no matter how accurate) will not get you a high mark. Your work should build upon what other people have done, not restate it.
- Don't forget to proof-read. The use of word-processing equipment makes the need for proof-reading more, not less, urgent. Although spelling checkers catch spelling mistakes, they do not notice nonsense.
- Don't write 'literary' essays. Unless you are very good at it (and most people aren't) 'artistic' writing is a mistake. Clarity is the first quality we look for in scientific writing, not elegance.
- If English is not your mother-tongue, don't worry excessively about the minutiae of grammar etc. but do your best to seek advice.

3 Essay and Dissertation Format

Submitted written work should be 1.5 line spaced and should be in 12pt text. In other respects, it should closely follow the recommendations of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, which is available in university libraries. Dewey (2006) links to a number of online resources which provide further information on APA style.

In brief, you should minimally observe the following conventions:

- Use an author-year citation style (e.g., *Mitchell and Corley (1994) supported earlier findings suggesting late effects of discourse in parsing (Mitchell, Corley, & Garnham, 1992), which were later challenged by...*). If there are three or more authors, use *et al.* in all but the first citation (e.g., *subject- and object-relatives did not appear to differ in reading times (Mitchell et al., 1992, experiment 1), contrary to...*). Use *in press* or *submitted* to refer to items that have not yet appeared in print (e.g., *stutterers appear to judge errorful speech more critically (Lickley, Hartsuiker, Corley, Russell, & Nelson, in press), but in a different way...*).
- Always give page numbers for quotations.
- Caption and number tables *above* each table, and be sure to use meaningful captions.
 - It is usually wrong to use vertical lines in tables.
- Caption and number figures *below* each figure, and be sure to use meaningful captions.
- Don't present the same data in a figure *and* a table unless there's a very good reason for doing so.
- Use section (and, if necessary, subsection) headings.
- When reporting experimental research (e.g., in a dissertation) provide an abstract of around 120 words.
- Prefer 'participant' to 'subject', and take care to write in a way which is gender-neutral unless gender is specifically at issue in what you write.

References

"References cited in text must appear in the reference list; conversely, each entry in the reference list must be cited in text" (APA, 2001, p. 215).

The papers cited above are included in APA format below, as a starting guide to APA reference format. If you are not familiar with the format, you are strongly advised to check *at least* the resources listed by Dewey (2006) before submitting an essay.

References

- Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.). (2001). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Dewey, R. A. (2006). *APA style resources*. Retrieved September 5, 2006 from <http://www.psywww.com/resource/apacrib.htm>.

- Lickley, R. J., Hartsuiker, R. J., Corley, M., Russell, M., & Nelson, R. (in press). Judgment of disfluency in people who stutter and people who do not stutter: Results from magnitude estimation. *Language and Speech*. (Actually published in 2005: This entry is only an example.)
- Mitchell, D. C., & Corley, M. (1994). Immediate biases in parsing: Discourse effects or experimental artifacts? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, 20(1), 217–222.
- Mitchell, D. C., Corley, M., & Garnham, A. (1992). Effects of context in human sentence processing: Evidence against a discourse-based proposal mechanism. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, 18(1), 69–88.

4 Further Information

Some useful information about writing in a good academic style can be found at http://homepages.ed.ac.uk/martinc/misc/Clark_Writing_Guidelines.pdf.

If you would like more information about planning and writing essays, the University offers the online *ISIS* course, available via WebCT. *ISIS* is described at <http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/interchange/spring2008/mogey2.htm>; to request access to the WebCT course, email isis@ed.ac.uk.