

## Frequently Asked Questions About Essays

Question: What kind of paper should I use?

Answer: You should use 8½" X 11" plain white paper (*not* parchment or thesis bond).

Q: How long should the essay be?

A: In this case, the limits are for undergraduates 625 words (2½, pages), 1750 words (7 pages), and 1750 words (7 pages), respectively. For graduates, the first written assignment is the same as for undergraduates—i.e., 625 words (2½ pages) and the research paper should be about 6500 words (25 pages). These are not an absolute limits. If you find you can adequately answer the question in fewer than the number of pages indicated or if you find that you need more than the number of pages indicated, then feel free to do so. You do not have to resort to expanding or diminishing margins, smaller or larger point size, or increased or decreased spacing between lines to make page limits. I say 2½, 7, and 7 pages for undergraduate assignments or 2½ pages and “about 6500 words” for graduate assignments to give you an approximate idea of how many pages and words I expect. But your essay will be graded on quality, not on number of pages or words.

Q: How large should the margins be?

A: Standard practice is for margins to be one inch on all sides (left, right, top, and bottom). For essays that you are expecting to get back, leave room for comments, say to 1½" on the left margin.

Q: Should I double-space or single-space the text?

A: You should double-space your text to leave room for corrections between the lines. Do not add an extra space between paragraphs. If you are using Word, then set the line spacing at “Exactly” and “26 point” rather than “Double”.

Q: May I hand in a handwritten essay?

A: Yes, you may handwrite your essay if you do so neatly. Be aware, however, that psychological tests have shown that graders tend to grade handwritten work as much as one full grade *lower* than the same work done on a typewriter or word processor. It should not be this way, but graders are human. We will try to compensate for that tendency, but, to avoid such subjective influences, it is preferable not to handwrite your essays.

Q: Should I use a binder?

A: No. A binder does not improve the quality of your essay and makes it difficult to carry around with other papers. A staple in the upper left-hand corner is sufficient.

Q: How should the essay be organized?

A: People who give speeches are advised: In your introduction, state briefly what you are about to say; in the body of your speech, say it; and in your conclusion, sum up briefly what you have just said. This is good advice for essay writers too. In your opening paragraph, you need to make a statement of your main theme or the hypothesis you are testing (or have tested). You can even begin a sentence with: “My hypothesis is. . .” or “My main them is. . .” The body of your essay should follow in a logical progression as you deal with the evidence that supports your hypothesis and the evidence that goes against it. Tie in what you say in one paragraph with what you say in the next paragraph. Avoid read-write type summarizing of plot or of someone else’s argument. Instead, make comparisons. Cite specific examples of what you are comparing. In your conclusion, besides recounting the results of your investigation, you can bring in any broader implications of your results and what still needs to be done. But avoid introducing any propositions into your conclusions that you have not already discussed in the body of your essay. I receive many essays where the writer states an idea in the conclusion that should have been stated in the introductory paragraph and could have been the main focus of the essay. I myself have had experiences where I have written an essay and, while I was writing the conclusion, came up with a better idea. I then had to throw out four-fifths of the essay I had just written and write another essay around that better idea. The writing of that revised version was much easier than writing the first draft because I now knew what I wanted to say, whereas, in writing the first draft, I was struggling to figure it out. It is also a good idea to have someone else read your essay before you hand it in, so that you can get a different perspective on it, or read it aloud to yourself.

Q: Should I use footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical references?

A: Yes, you should cite the sources of your information as specifically as you can. Any standard form of citation is acceptable as long as you are consistent in whichever one you choose. For a style manual, I recommend the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and graduate students who plan to do a thesis in the ALM program are encouraged to use either the *MLA Handbook* style or the *Chicago Manual of Style* of footnoting and bibliographical citation. Copies of both style manuals are available in the Widener Library reading room.

In any system you use, avoid *ibid.*, *op. cit.*, and *loc. cit.* They are not recommended for a very good reason—they are confusing.

Q: May I use an encyclopedia?

A: Yes, by all means. The world of learning is open to you. You may, and are encouraged to, use any and all sources of information. But, remember, an encyclopedia is merely the beginning of research. It provides information that is already well known. In order to do original work you will have to go beyond what you find in an encyclopedia. Nor should you rely on just one source. Gather as much evidence as you can. I especially recommend that you take a guided tour of Widener Library to find out what is available to you. This tour is free and is available to you throughout the summer.

Q: Do I need to cite an encyclopedia if I use one?

A: Usually, you do not need to cite an encyclopedia, since it mostly contains what is considered “encyclopedic” information, that is, information that is in the public domain. If you do quote directly from an encyclopedia or if you recount the opinion of the author of one of the articles, then you should cite both the title of the article and, if possible, the author as well. Encyclopedia articles often contain personal opinions because they are written by human beings, who have opinions.

Q: May I use information from the an Internet website?

A: Yes, but be aware that, as in the world of print, there is a lot of junk and unreliable information on the Internet. You have to exercise your skepticism and evaluate the reliability of the evidence as best as you can. If you do cite the Internet, be sure to supply the website, the date the website was last updated or the date you accessed it, and the URL (website address). To set off the URL from the rest of the text (and so you can add a period at the end), inclose the URL in angle brackets, e.g., <<http://www.dce.harvard.edu>>.

Q: When should I expect my essay back?

A: We will do our best to get your essays back to you within one week.

Q: If I am dissatisfied with the comments or grade, what can I do?

A: You should discuss the essay first with the person who graded it, in this case, with the course assistant who marked your paper. Then, if you are still dissatisfied, discuss it with the instructor of the course, in this case, me. In this course, we encourage you to discuss your essays with us even if you are satisfied with the grade or comments. There are certain ground rules for discussion,

however. You should *not* request a grade change. If we feel a grade change is justified, we will do so without any prompting. We are as concerned as you are that justice be served. When you discuss your essay with us, we will be asking ourselves if we have not perhaps given your essay too low a grade. But, remember, we have read other essays in the course, so we have a good idea of their relative quality. We will readily acknowledge if we have made a mistake, but we also do not want to compromise on our standards. You may and are encouraged to ask for clarification of comments and for suggestions how the essay can be improved. Besides, we would much prefer to evaluate a revised version than to change the mark on an essay already graded.

Q: How do I contact you if I have questions?

A: There are six ways to contact me: (1) office hours; (2) phone; (3) fax; (4) e-mail; (5) after class; and (6) snail mail. My office is at 51 Brattle Street (the Extension School building) #703. I have twelve (12) office hours each week: MTF 3:00–7:00 p.m. Feel free to stop by anytime during those hours, or call ahead to make an appointment. My office phone number is (617)495-4547. The voice mail comes on if I am on the phone already, so leave a message and I will call you back as soon as I get your message. My fax number is (617)495-9176. Your fax message will arrive on the fifth floor of 51 Brattle and will get to me, but only if you put my name on the cover sheet. My email address is: don@wjh.harvard.edu (within Harvard University that's don@wjh). You can also speak to me after class, since I am usually among the last to leave the room. If you cannot come during my office hours, do not have a phone or access to a fax machine or international computer network, and have to leave immediately after class, then send me a written note telling me how I can get contact you to set up an appointment at a time and place that is mutually agreeable, or we can just communicate by mail. The office address is 51 Brattle Street, Cambridge MA 02138. If you want to hand deliver the message, I have two mail boxes at 51 Brattle, both on the seventh floor. One is outside the seventh-floor lounge (kitchen) area. The other is in the ALM wing of the building above the file cabinets. Or you can slip the message under the door of my office (#703).

Q: May I revise my graded essays after I receive a grade?

A: Yes, we will accept revisions of your graded essays and we encourage you to revise them. But, be aware that the standards of grading are higher for revised essays because you have the benefit of comments. We expect a *substantial* improvement in the quality of the essay before we will consider raising your grade. Correcting spelling and grammar errors is not sufficient in itself because, although we do mark such errors, they are not part of the basis of your grade. Minimal improvements in content or changes here and there also are not enough. Be sure to hand in the first, graded version of your essay with the revised version. There is, however, a *terminus post quem non* (TPQN) date, after which we will accept no further revisions on graded essays (consult the course syllabus).

Q: When are the revisions of the graded essays due?

A: You may hand in the revisions of your graded essays anytime up to and including the *terminus post quem non* date on the syllabus, and no later than that date, unless you make special arrangements with your teaching assistant ahead of time.

Q: If I am dissatisfied with my final grade for the course, what can I do about it?

A: I am allowed to change final grades for only one reason: a computation error. Otherwise, all grades submitted to the Registrar are final.

Q: How can I get my final exam and third graded essay back?

A: There are two ways: (1) Give me a SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope) big enough for your essay and test, and with sufficient postage, and I will mail them to you; and (2) stop by my office at 51 Brattle Street #703 during my office hours. I will keep the tests and essays there for at least one year.

Don Ostrowski