

UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO  
DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS

# Writing Better Essays

---

An In-depth Guide to Improving Essay Skills for  
Classics Students

Nathan Watson

2013

The following document is designed purely for essays in Classics. Though much of it universally applies to all essays, it should not countermand any specific guidelines for essays in other subjects. Always follow the guidelines of the department for which your essay is being assessed.

# Writing Better Essays

## Method

The most important thing to understand about essays is that you do not have to possess great ideas or be stunningly intelligent to write good essays. All you need to know is the Method behind writing them. The Method involves understanding the **Question**, giving your response to it the correct **Structure**, using clear **References** and a **Bibliography**, and the special ingredient: **Clarity**. Understanding how these aspects work together will make the prospect of an essay less daunting and, hopefully, an enjoyable intellectual challenge.

## Question

An essay question is both all important and inconsequential. Let me explain. The question is all important in that it sets the parameters of your response. It hangs over your essay like a schoolmaster with a cane, and if you do not adequately respond to it, it will punish you. And yet the question is inconsequential in that the position you decide to take for your response is not as important as how you go about presenting it.<sup>1</sup> That is, success depends upon whether you have applied the Method.

When addressing the question, think about what is it asking you to do. An essay question may ask you to:

- argue for or against a viewpoint. This can be argued strongly: 'X is this and not that'. Or it can be argued moderately: 'X is more like this than that'. Or balance can be found: 'in these circumstances X is this and under those circumstances X is that'. One might even argue that 'X is neither this nor that'.<sup>2</sup>
- discuss X. You have to identify key aspects or themes of X and why they are important for understanding or showing the significance of the topic.
- compare and contrast X and Y. You have to identify themes that are relevant to both X and Y and examine how these themes are treated by each.<sup>3</sup>

When planning your essay, identify the scope of the question. This defines the boundaries of your argument or discussion. Whatever is beyond the scope of the question, you should not discuss. That is to say, if it does not directly help to answer the essay question, it should not be in the essay. A question focussing on the relationship of Dido and Aeneas in the *Aeneid* does not require you to spend time discussing the differences between Roman marriage and marriage in New Zealand. So when you are reading your sources, discard the bits that are irrelevant, and take note of the sections that most relate to the question.<sup>4</sup> You could write an essay that is perfect in every other way, but if it does not answer the question correctly, you simply cannot get full marks.

---

<sup>1</sup> While essays do not have a 'right' answer, there *are* wrong answers. So, including something that is factually inaccurate or 'off topic' will not win you marks.

<sup>2</sup> Beware picking holes in the essay question. This comes across as spiteful or petulant, and often arises from misunderstanding the question.

<sup>3</sup> These examples do not cover all types of questions; they are simply common forms of essay questions.

<sup>4</sup> It is possible that when reading scholarship for your essay, you get swept up by the arguments of scholars and wish to include as many of their interesting ideas in your essay as you can. Remember, however, that these scholars are arguing their own thesis; they did not write with your essay question in mind. So ask yourself if the idea you wish to include really helps you to answer the essay question, or if you just want to include it because you like it.

If a question has two or more parts, make sure you discuss each part during the essay, giving balance to your argument so that it doesn't seem like you added the second part as an afterthought.

Sometimes an essay question starts with a quote from a primary or secondary source. Often, the quote itself is not the focus of the question, but rather it is included to direct you *to* the focus of the question. That is, it might not be relevant to talk about the context in which the person said the quote, or why he or she said it, but rather to talk about what the quote is getting at (with regards to the topic).

It helps to include the essay question in your assignment, either on a title page or above the start of your essay. This shows the reader you know what the question is and think it is important enough to include. Avoid paraphrasing the question because you may alter its meaning. Essay questions are very carefully worded to limit misunderstanding.

## Structure

An essay is made up of three parts: introduction, body, and conclusion. Each part has a specific job to do. If any part fails to do its job, the whole essay suffers as a result.

### *Introduction*

An introduction's job is to introduce the topic. It does this by briefly setting out what the topic is and what your position is regarding the question. For an essay, an introduction should only be one paragraph. Be specific about your topic, but don't go into too much detail—no examples or definitions are needed in an introduction because that's not its job.

So, if your question asks you to discuss the thematic links between three myths, it is best to say what the three myths are and to specify what themes you have identified. Don't talk about myth in general, or the culture from which they sprung, or the human need to communicate via story. That is to say, it is not necessary to 'wow' the reader with grandiose statements or pithy quotes that broadly relate to your topic:

Greek myths are the most widely influential and interesting stories that have survived from ancient culture into the modern world.

The trouble with such sweeping statements is that they are generally subjective (what if your reader happens to like Norse myths more?) and distracting (they don't address the question). Similarly, rhetorical questions are also a bad choice for a first sentence. But it is even worse to quote the essay question in an introduction. That is just lazy.

The first one or two sentences of an introduction should directly address the question with a statement outlining your position regarding the topic. Using the terminology of the question helps to keep the statement focussed and ensures that you have not misinterpreted or misrepresented it.

The next sentence, or sentences, should explain what the key aspects are that inform your position (the aspects that help to explain why you are arguing that position).

The last part of the introduction should outline the method of your argument and the structure of your essay. 'First, the essay will discuss X before moving on to discuss Y. Finally, the importance of Z with respect to A shall be addressed'. With that done, you move on to your argument.

The test of whether an introduction has done its job is if someone can guess what the essay question is just from reading it. If not, the introduction has failed.

## Body

The job of the body of an essay is to follow up what you said you were going to do in the introduction. You take each aspect of the topic and discuss it in detail. Ideally, the paragraphs should logically follow one another, so that you could not discuss Y before discussing X, hence your choice to discuss X, Y, and then Z. Your points should occur in the order in which you outlined them in the introduction. (This is why it helps to write the introduction last. That way, you know exactly what they are and what their order is.) The body is where all your examples and quotes should be found—not in your introduction or conclusion.

It might be necessary to give some cultural, historical, or biographical background information on your topic. This should be as brief as possible because it is not strictly your argument itself, which is the part that gives you the marks. Depending on the overall length of the essay, a short paragraph should suffice. Most importantly, you should know why you have included this background info. Does it help you to make crucial points later in your argument? Or is it there because you just want to show off your knowledge? Or are you just trying to reach the word count?

Beware including too much narrative or simple information that you can probably assume the reader already knows. So, saying ‘Agamemnon, the most powerful king of the Achaeans’, or ‘Apollo, god of healing’, is unnecessary – unless you wish to highlight this aspect of their character for the point you are going to make. If your task is to identify the themes of a myth, don’t just narrate the myth in the body of the essay and say what the themes were in the conclusion. That essay’s body has failed to do its job.

If the essay question makes a basic assumption, for instance, that you know what a myth is, do not provide a definition of *myth*, or go into detail about the different types. On the other hand, if the essay question asks you to discuss Roman marriage from the woman’s perspective and you talk about the social and legal ramifications of *sine manu* marriage regarding a woman’s dowry—without mentioning what a *sine manu* marriage was—you might lose marks for not going into enough detail. What it is best to include becomes a judgement call. Look to the essay question to see what knowledge it assumes and what key concepts it mentions.

The body of the essay is made up of paragraphs. A paragraph should start with a statement that outlines its topic.

The married life of a Roman woman was often difficult.

The next sentence explains aspects of the statement’s topic.

This is partly because they were often married at a young age to older men and expected to provide many children.

Then you should use some examples or quotes that back up your point.

For example, an epitaph for a woman named Quintilia explains that she was married at age thirteen to a man fifteen years older than her and had six children before her death at age twenty-four (*CIL* 6.2451).<sup>5</sup> Whitmarsh believes that such age gaps would have “[influenced] the relationship of husband and wife” so that the young wife would have naturally deferred to her older husband’s authority.<sup>6</sup>

You must relate the examples and quotes you include back to your point or to the essay question. Don’t leave it up to your reader to do this: be explicit.

---

<sup>5</sup> Shelton (1998), passage 451.

<sup>6</sup> Whitmarsh (2006) 58. [If you edit a word in a quote to make it grammatical for your sentence, use square brackets to indicate this. Use ... to show you have omitted a word or words (too much ... can look ... suspicious ...).]

Disobedience, however, could result in physical abuse from the husband, which would have meant that many young wives lived in fear of their husbands' anger. The above inscription also highlights the expectation that a wife produce children for her husband. Moreover, that only two of Quintilia's six children survived reveals how the difficult this task could be in a pre-industrial society.

If you are really clever, the last sentence of a paragraph will invite the discussion of the next paragraph. This shows a logical flow of your argument. In the above example, the next paragraph would logically discuss infant mortality in ancient Rome and its likely effects on Roman wives and households.

### *Conclusion*

The job of a conclusion is to pick out the key ideas that you have been arguing in response to the question. Readdress the essay question in light of the discussion you have just provided. It helps to reuse the same terminology for consistency (as per the introduction—but don't just repeat the introduction's sentence verbatim). You can then summarise each main point in the body of the essay in the logical order in which you presented them. Don't just say that you have discussed what the question has asked you to discuss: "This essay has discussed key themes linking the myths of Prometheus and Pandora." You must be specific and say what the key themes were (and why). "The recurring motif of the appetising yet ultimately useless gift demonstrates that deceptive gift-giving is the key theme linking the myths of Prometheus and Pandora." The trick is to say what you have argued in a concise way that does not just repeat what you have already said. Be specific, but don't go into too much detail (for instance, don't repeat examples). Like introductions, conclusions should be one paragraph.

The best way to let your readers know that they have begun to read the conclusion is to say something like 'In sum(mary)', 'To conclude', or to refer to what your essay has shown so far:

The above study has shown that the experience of Roman women was varied and complex. On the one hand they were expected to obey their husbands at all times, but on the other hand wealthy women could experience a degree of freedom unavailable to poorer women.

The last sentence of the essay is very important. So avoid referring to something vital using a pronoun ('it/he/she', or 'they'), and also avoid weak words like 'might' or 'could', which show uncertainty.

It might be said to reflect the harsh, militaristic values of Rome's soldier citizenry. [weak]

The popularity of gladiatorial combat reflects the harsh, militaristic values of Rome's soldier citizenry. [strong]

In a conclusion, never include information that you have not already discussed in the body of the essay. (So that means no new footnotes!) The time for discussing the material of the topic is over; your argument is drawing to a close, not breaking new ground. Here it is common for students to get swept away by their own argument and attempt to say something profound. That is fine, so long as it is on topic. Never deviate from the question to discuss something else in the conclusion. If you have been discussing the themes of ancient Greek myths for the whole essay, do not start talking about how parallels can be seen in modern cinema, or how modern society has its own myths. The irrelevant digression belongs to old Abe Simpson, not your essay.

## References

If you have understood the essay question and responded to it with a correctly structured argument, you should have done enough to pass. But if you want top marks, you'll have to master referencing.

You include references to primary sources when you quote from or refer to a specific episode or instance from an ancient text. For instance, if you say that "Hector calls his brother Paris the bane of Troy before the duel with Menelaus", it is necessary to show the book and line number from Homer so your readers can check it for themselves. If, however, you say something that is not specific to a passage or is widely understood, you do not need to provide a reference. For example, if you say that "Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works & Days* reveal a misogynistic attitude that is the product of a patriarchal society", you don't need to cite specific passages (though, if you did want to provide examples, you would).

You include references to secondary sources when you use ideas from them. If you say that "the chances of survival for a gladiator in the first century BC were one in ten", you will need to cite whoever gave you that statistic. You also need to include a reference to your secondary source whenever you say something like "Futrell states" or "Hopkins argues" or "Slater believes"—otherwise readers cannot verify your claims. If you don't include a reference, your argument is weakened. If you keep failing to reference, you risk receiving a zero for plagiarism.

When referencing, use italics for book, journal and film titles. So, you would refer to Homer's *Iliad* using italics (e.g. Homer, *Iliad* 3.50).<sup>7</sup>

Use in-text references for primary sources:

In one of his letters, Seneca states that abusive masters would beat their slaves for something as simple as coughing (Seneca, *Letters* 47).

Use footnotes for secondary sources:

Nevertheless, Pittman argues that the Romans were totally awesome.<sup>8</sup>

Note that the footnote is always placed *after* punctuation marks: .<sup>1</sup> ;<sup>2</sup> ,<sup>3</sup> .<sup>4</sup> :<sup>5</sup> )<sup>6</sup> ).<sup>7</sup>

There is no magic number for the amount of references an essay should have. But if a 2,000 word essay only has three or four footnotes, chances are you haven't referred to enough secondary sources. If you are writing about a text, say Book IV of Vergil's *Aeneid*, and do not include any in-text references to passages from it, this is probably going to count against you, suggesting you have merely skimmed over a plot outline of it on Wikipedia.

## Bibliography

Different essays require different amounts of reading, so no one number of sources is going to apply to all essays. To be sure, ask your tutor. But a general rule would be to include **at least** five secondary sources. Three is not really enough (you'd have to be referring to them frequently to make up for the small number of sources). One or two sources will mean that marks are deducted. Part of the point of writing essays is to show that you can process information from authorities on your topic to offer an informed opinion, presenting the information of others correctly using quotes, footnotes, and a bibliography. Having an opinion is great, but having an informed opinion is so much better.

---

<sup>7</sup> (Homer, *Iliad* 3.50) = Homer's *Iliad*, Book 3, line 50.

<sup>8</sup> Pittman (1989) 178. [Surname of author (date of publishing) page number. This is sufficient detail for footnotes. Leave full bibliographical information for the bibliography.]

Beware using websites as sources; there is a lot of rubbish out there. And while Wikipedia is a very useful website *in general*, for an academic essay, it should not be used. Websites with *.edu* or *.ac* in the address are more trustworthy. If you do use websites as sources, know that having half of your bibliography comprised of websites is still not a good look.

The various types of sources in a bibliography should look like this:

A journal article:

Rives, J. B. (1994). 'The Priesthood of Apuleius', *American Journal of Philology* 115: 273-290.

A book:

Walsh, P. G. (1970). *The Roman Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

A chapter from a single author book:

Massey, I. (1976). 'The Golden Ass: Character versus Structure', in *The Gaping Pig: Literature and Metamorphosis*. Berkley: California UP: 34-58.

A chapter from a book with a single editor:

Shumate, N. J. (1999). 'Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*: the Inserted Tales', in H. Hofmann (ed.), *Latin Fiction: the Latin Novel in Context*. London: Routledge: 113-25.

A chapter from a book with multiple editors:

James, P. and M. O'Brien (2006). 'To Baldly Go: a Last Look at Lucius and his Counter-humiliation Strategies', in W. H. Keulen, R. R. Nauta, and S. Panayotakis (eds.), *Lectiones Scrupulosae: Essays on the Text and Interpretation of Apuleius' Metamorphoses in Honour of Maaike Zimmerman*. Groningen: Barkhuis: 234-251.

A translation of a primary source:

*Apuleius. The Golden Ass*. Trans. P. G. Walsh (1999). Oxford: Oxford UP.

A website:

<http://sites.la.utexas.edu/cicero/biography/> [date accessed: 10/9/2013]

You may choose to use a different referencing style from the above examples (e.g. Harvard, or APA), that is fine, but whatever you use, be consistent. Note how the examples DO NOT include 'p', 'pp', or 'pg' with page numbers. Note also the use of capital letters in titles. Sometimes it also helps to separate your bibliography into primary and secondary sources.

### Clarity

So now your essay focuses upon the question, your response to it is correctly structured, and you have accurately referenced your sources: you should be in for some good marks. But wait! Does your argument make any sense to the reader? Or are your sentences riddled with grammatical errors, typos, and an incorrect use of words?

The point of an essay is to answer a question. You do so by communicating ideas to your readers in the clearest way possible so that they can understand them. The best way to do this is to keep your English simple and formal. Don't try to sound smart by using 'big' words or 'jargon' terms. (Of course, some topic-specific words are unavoidable.) This often happens unconsciously by imitating the language and style of books or articles you have read. Often, however, these authors have become so used to the terms and jargon of their topic that it might make sense to them but is often difficult for others to grasp. You don't want to be ~~abstruse~~ unclear in an essay. You can use all the clever sounding words and multiple clauses you like and—even if grammatical—still not get your meaning across clearly. This is not writing intelligently because it actually obstructs your message. Keeping your English direct and your sentences uncomplicated is the best way to get your message across. So, simple

writing is intelligent writing. If you make it easy for readers, they will likely enjoy the essay more than something that confused them and made *them* feel stupid for not understanding it.

The best way to tidy up your sentences is to proofread. The best way to proofread is reading your sentences out loud.

Individually, many of the following points will not alter the marks for your essay greatly (if at all). But every little thing adds up, so it pays to make a good impression to your readers by not making the little mistakes.

### *Layout*

Make sure you layout the essay as per the guidelines. This will usually include using a 12pt serif font, using double line-spacing, printing on one side of the page, and leaving space in the left margin for markers to insert comments. Page numbers help. A separate page for the bibliography is a good idea. Avoid using headings for each of your points. If your essay is structured well, it won't need them.

### *Images*

Only include images if they are relevant to a point you are making (i.e. you refer to the image in your text). If you include them merely for decoration or to show that you know how to use Google image search, you will only distract from your argument.

### *Quotations*

Try to use quotations from secondary sources sparingly, if at all. And only include them if they say something of vital importance that you could not have worded better yourself. If you wish to refute what a source has said, it is a courtesy to quote it so that the reader can see you are not misrepresenting the source. But large chunks of text that are not your own will only hide your own voice. Writers can get away with that in books because books are longer. Essays are short, so long quotes or lots of little ones are a waste of words.

If you do use a quote, you **must** introduce it correctly so that the reader understands why it is there and who said it. Don't just shove it in and hope the reader knows why you have included it. So say something like: "Regarding survival rates, Johnstone states: 'Gladiator shows were hardly the bloodbaths we see in modern films and TV programs.'" You don't have to say: "In Alexander D. Johnstone's book *Gladiators and Charioteers*, he states: ..." The book's title (and the author's initials) will be included in the bibliography, which is enough. And **never** refer to your quote as a quote ("This ~~quote~~ shows that..."). Do not use italics for quotes (unless the italics are there in the source).

### *Capitalisation*

People (individuals, races, nations) and places should be capitalised. This includes the Underworld, the Golden Age, and the Garden of Eden. These are names of specific places. 'The Late Republic' and 'the Roman Empire' are specific terms relating to politically defined periods of Roman history, and thus can include capitals. But to say 'Rome was a republic' or 'Rome expanded its empire' does not require capitals because *republic* and *empire* are here being used as generic terms rather than specific ones. This goes for titles as well. So the *emperor* in 'Emperor Nero was crazy' is specific, whereas in 'Nero was a crazy emperor', *emperor* is generic.

Don't use capitals for the *g* in 'Olympian gods'. Whether a believer or not, *God* refers to the Judaeo-Christian *monotheistic* divinity. The word *Titan* (with a capital) refers a member



of the generation of gods before the Olympians. But *titan* merely refers to something very large.

You may want to capitalise the *a* in ‘ancient Rome’, or *c* in ‘classical Greece’. If you choose to do so, stand by your decision and be consistent.

### *Herakles versus Hercules*

Using Greek or Roman forms for the names for gods or heroes is a matter of personal preference. It pays to stick to whatever the essay question uses, but you will not be marked down for using another form, so long as it is correct and you use it consistently.

### *Rhetorical questions*

Responding to a question with more questions is annoying. So, try to avoid posing direct rhetorical questions to the reader in an essay; these are usually tiresome to read because they shift the burden of answering the question to the reader when the reader just wants to sit back and let you do that. Rhetorical questions are useful for the person writing the essay (i.e. they help you come to grips with the topic), but when it comes time to write the essay itself, it is best to rephrase them as statements or indirect questions.

Question: Why did Zeus chose to punish man for Prometheus’ sins?

Statement: Zeus chose to punish man for Prometheus’ sins because...

Direct: Why did slaves not run away from their masters more often?

Indirect: The question arises as to why slaves did not run away from their masters more often.

You can then go on to answer the indirect question without the reader feeling like you have tried to pull them into *your* discussion. So, one maxim of essay writing is: *don’t ask: tell*.

### *Elision*

Elision is what happens to words when we speak them (causally). In written form, it is marked with an apostrophe, representing a missing letter or letters. But because spoken English is not formal enough for an essay, don’t write *don’t*. Instead, write *do not*. This goes for many other elided forms: e.g. *would have* for *would’ve*, *it is* for *it’s*, *she would* for *she’d*.

### *Colloquialisms*

Colloquialisms are phrases and words that are commonly used in conversation but have a non-literal meaning (e.g. ‘bucketing down’). Use of colloquialisms implies a level of familiarity with the reader that is unsuitable for an essay. Moreover, they weaken an argument by obscuring meaning; e.g. ‘He was wasted’. By a wasting disease? Or does this mean ‘inebriated’?

### *First Person (‘I, we’) and Second Person (‘you’)*

Some say not to use *I* in an essay. Others say it is fine. My personal rule is to use it—if at all—only in an introduction (and to a lesser extent, the conclusion), rather than in the body of the essay. If you do choose to use *I*, use it sparingly, otherwise your essay might seem weird, like a self-centred super villain divulging his evil plan in minute detail to a subdued hero.

Avoid the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural ‘we, us’. Saying ‘**Let us** now turn to the issue of manumission’ sounds pretentious. If you must guide your reader through your argument, use: ‘Turning (now) to the issue of manumission’. It still sounds a tad phoney. ‘With this evidence, **we** are shown the unsavoury side of Roman society’. This sentence is not so bad, but again it tries to include the reader in the essay. This is fine for books, but for an essay it is artificial and a

breach of expected roles. The reader (your marker) should remain a separate and impersonal individual. You wouldn't try to hold hands with someone interviewing you for a job, would you? Thus, the sentence with *we* can be rephrased to maintain distance from the reader: 'This evidence illustrates the unsavoury side of Roman society.'

Don't use the 2<sup>nd</sup> person in an essay. In spoken English, this is used for generalisation: 'You would expect that...' or 'You don't win by giving up'. The 'you', however, tends to pull the readers into your argument, which distracts them from what you are saying. This can be avoided by using the indefinite one: 'One would expect that...' or 'One does not win by giving up'. It may sound strange, but that's just because it is more formal, which is what an essay should be.

### *Italics*

Use italics for foreign words (French, Latin, German etc.). For Latin words, this even applies to those words that look like English words: an 'editor' in English is different from an *editor* (in a gladiatorial context) for the Romans. Likewise, a trainer of gladiators is a *doctor*, which is very different from the meaning of 'doctor' in English. In an essay on gladiators, however, the English word 'gladiator' refers to the same thing in Latin (a person who fights to entertain others), so it does not need to be italicised. Likewise, it is not necessary to italicise Greek or Latin names.

When using plurals of Latin words, you should use the Latin plural, not an English plural. (So, *doctores/editores* rather than *doctors/editors* – beware the auto-correction feature of word processing software, which will try to correct the -es to -s). Again, English 'gladiators' is fine.

### *Colon/Semi-colon use*

If you don't know how to use these, look them up on Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colon\\_%28punctuation%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colon_%28punctuation%29)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semi\\_colon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semi_colon)

If you still don't know how to use them and are writing an essay, wondering whether to put one in a sentence, it is better to play it safe and use a comma or a full stop. Or, you could look at how I have used them in this document; it might help.

### *Writing clearly and correctly*

Make sure *pronouns* agree with their **antecedent** in number and gender.

When **man** accepted the gift of woman, *they* accepted the conditions attached to her.

The antecedent of 'they' is 'man', but in this sentence the two do not agree in number. The word 'man' (even though, in this instance, it refers to all men) is singular. So it should read:

When **man** accepted the gift of woman, *he* accepted the conditions attached to her.

English is a largely un-gendered language, but when it comes to pronouns, it is still important to get things right. If the abstract 'mankind' is substituted for 'man' (signifying all men), the pronoun needs to change:

When **mankind** accepted the gift of woman, *it* accepted the conditions attached to her.

Beware using the wrong form of a *verb* for certain words that refer to a collective but are grammatically singular:

**Mankind** *are* a race of brutes. [ungrammatical]

**Mankind** *is* a race of brutes.

In order to create easy to understand sentences, try to make the subject of your sentence something concrete rather than abstract.

'Romans were very cruel.' ('Romans' is concrete because we know exactly what it is—there is no ambiguity—and it is the type of subject we expect to be carrying out the action of a verb).

'The cruelty of Roman society was very pronounced.' ('The cruelty of Roman society' is an abstract concept that is subjective and not as easy to grasp or to picture for a reader).

This abstraction often happens when nominalisations are used as the subject of a sentence. (Nominalisations are verbs that have been turned into nouns by giving them the ending '-tion/-sion' or '-ing'. E.g. the noun 'modification', from the verb 'to modify', or the noun 'reading' – as in, 'have you done the reading?' – from the verb 'to read'). By turning the nominalisations back into verbs, a sentence can be improved. So the sentence, '**The construction** of this sentence is not good', is not as good as, '**This sentence** is constructed well'.

The above idea is connected to another 'rule', which is: use strong verbs (where possible) over weak verbs. Consider the following:

**The disregard for gladiators' lives** was not universally shared by all Romans.

Not all **Romans** disregarded the lives of gladiators.

The verb 'to be' (i.e. 'is, was' etc.) is weak because it is used for all sorts of sentences, and thus does not come across as strongly as verbs that have specific meanings. The verb 'to disregard' is very specific in its meaning and therefore strengthens the sentence. (Note how I did not use: 'the sentence *has* a greater strength'. The verb 'to have' is also weak because it is used so widely.)

Sentences should start with familiar information (i.e. something you have already mentioned) and end with new information (i.e. something you haven't mentioned before).

Roman society was very cruel compared to modern societies. Wealthy Romans would host funeral games in which **gladiators** were killed. **These gladiators** usually had no choice about whether they would fight. Sometimes, however, **these men** could be granted *mercy* when defeated. *Mercy* was granted by the ORGANISER OF THE GAMES, who usually followed the opinion of the crowd.

(Note the progression of information as represented by the typeface: Romans, **gladiators**, *mercy*, and then the ORGANISER OF THE GAMES)

Roman society was very cruel compared to modern societies. **Gladiators** were killed at the funeral games of wealthy Romans. *The choice* of whether **gladiators** would fight was not usually **their own**. **Defeat**, however, could sometimes result in *mercy* for **these men**. THE ORGANISER, who usually followed the opinion of the crowd, would be the one to grant this *mercy*.

(Note the confusion of information: Romans, **gladiators**, Romans, *choice*, **gladiators**, **defeat**, *mercy*, **gladiators**, ORGANISER, and back to *mercy*.)

Both paragraphs say the same thing, but the way their sentences are structured means that the message comes across much more clearly in the first. It is less confusing for the reader. Over the course of a whole essay, this clarity of argument can be the difference between a B+ and an A. The essays might reach the same conclusion by using the same sources and arguing the same points, but clarity of thought will make any argument more convincing and more enjoyable to read.

Try to use the active voice rather than the passive voice **when you can**. (Active = subject acts upon something else. Passive = subject is acted upon by something else.) Too often critics insist that one should *always use the active voice: never use the passive*. But the passive voice is useful when keeping to the above rule about starting a sentence with familiar

information and ending with new information. Note that two sentences from the first (better) paragraph, above, use the passive voice: ‘Sometimes, however, these men could be granted mercy when defeated. Mercy was granted by the organiser of the games, who usually followed the opinion of the crowd.’ The second paragraph uses the active voice for these sentences, but this leads to confusion because the sentences start with new information: ‘Defeat, however, could sometimes result in mercy for these men. The organiser, who usually followed the opinion of the crowd, would be the one to grant this mercy.’ So the trick is to know when you are using the active and passive voices and why you are using them. That having been said, please refrain from using the passive ‘X **is evidenced by** Y’. It is so much better to say that ‘Y **proves** X’ or ‘Y **illustrates** X’.

Try to keep the start of a sentence simple and reserve the complex information for the end. It helps to have the verb follow the subject closely and to keep the subject close to the start.

Being flogged and sewn into a sack with a chicken, a snake, and a dog, and then thrown into a river was how Romans executed parricides.

Romans executed parricides by flogging them, sowing them into a sack with a chicken, a snake, and a dog, and then throwing them into a river.

The end of a sentence is where the stress falls. Therefore, to write strong sentences, you should end with information you wish to stress (rather than, for instance, metadiscourse).

For the most part, however, one cannot be sure when gladiatorial contests became such *grand spectacles*.

One cannot be sure, however, when gladiatorial contests became such grand spectacles, *for the most part*.

Both say the same thing but the second is so very anticlimactic.

### *Metadiscourse*

What the heck is metadiscourse? Metadiscourse is comments you make about your discussion or comments that direct the reader through it. Chances are you use it all the time without realising it. Now you know what it is, you can know when you are using it, and make sure you are using it correctly.

Some useful metadiscourse:

- To introduce an example use: ‘for instance’ or ‘for example’. Using them for every example, though, might get tedious.
- To introduce another idea that compliments or builds upon the one before it, use: ‘in addition/additionally’, ‘moreover’, or ‘furthermore’.
- To introduce an idea that is contrary to the one before or offers an alternative, use: ‘conversely’, ‘by contrast’, ‘alternatively’, or ‘however’.
- To introduce an idea that is true or proves a point regardless of a statement you (or someone you quoted) just made, use: ‘nevertheless’, ‘nonetheless’, ‘and yet’, or ‘even so’.
- To introduce succeeding points, use ‘First(ly)’, ‘Second(ly)’, ‘Third(ly)’, and for the last one, ‘Finally’. ‘First of all’ is not good. Delete the redundant ‘of all’ part.
- To introduce conclusions, use: ‘to sum up’, ‘in conclusion’, or ‘it can be seen, then, that...’

(Note that such metadiscourse is separated from the main text by using commas.)

Some metadiscourse, however, is not so useful:

To begin/start with, the Romans had a martial society.

This pointlessly wastes words. Just launch straight into the topic:

The Romans had a martial society.

### *'However' and 'But'*

For the use of *however* to introduce an alternative, there are two schools of thought. One school believes that, in this sense, *however* is a postpositive conjunction: it should never be used as the first word in a sentence, but instead after a word or phrase and placed between commas. However, the other school believes that it can be used as the first word in a sentence in an adversative sense (it should still have a comma after it to differentiate it from an adverbial sense, see below). So, seeing as grammarians don't agree, you can use it both ways. But that having been said, one should not use *however* to connect two independent clauses in the same sentence (i.e. as a coordinating conjunction). This is to confuse *however* with *but*. For example:

I hate writing essays, but I will if I have to.

I hate writing essays, however I will if I have to. [incorrect]

Note what can be achieved with the magic touch of punctuation:

I hate writing essays; however, I will if I have to.

The adverb *however* can be used as the first word in a sentence in the sense of 'to whatever degree'. Note that the difference sense requires the comma to be placed in different positions:

However many essays I write, I always seem to be given one more to do. [adverb]

However, I think I shall do better now that I understand the Method. [adversative]

### *How important is the word count?*

You should attempt to stick to your word count. That is, try to stick to within 10% of it. So an essay with a word count of 1,500 words can be 150 words shorter or longer without incurring penalty. Markers do not count the words in the hope of penalising you. It is simply that, if someone hands in an essay that is a thousand words short, the student has most certainly not discussed the topic in the right amount of detail. Conversely, if another student hands in an essay that is a thousand words over, he or she has probably gone into too much detail or discussed things that are not directly relevant. Either case is not ideal, but of the two, the second one would be more likely to get the better mark.

### *The difference between Arguing and Ranting*

Essays are personal. You are expressing your own thoughts and opinions. Nevertheless, making an argument and 'having a rant' are very different things. An essay is not a place to make personal judgement calls about things that rub you up the wrong way. You may think an author (or character) is stupid or a sexist pig, but it does not help your argument to say this in an essay—if anything, it takes away from your argument because it distracts the reader. Maintaining a calm and mature academic voice will give your argument more force.

Dido is an idiot who deserves her fate; she pursues Aeneas even after he tells her the gods are sending him to Italy. [rant]

One might say that Dido acts foolishly in pursuing Aeneas because she has been informed that the gods will him to go to Italy.<sup>9</sup> [balanced argument]

---

<sup>9</sup> 'One might say' is something that, used frequently, will weaken your argument. But if used for something that is highly subjective and can be interpreted differently, it will give your argument the impression of balance, strengthening it.

### *One last thing*

This Method for writing essays is only a guide (designed for essays in Classics). Following its 'rules' will not guarantee an instant A+, but it should enable you to improve gradually. Moreover, every good essay will not necessarily have followed every one of the 'rules'. Some rules were made to be broken, but some are better left unbroken. The trick is to know which to break, when to break them, and why you think it is best to do so. To recognize these things, you must follow the rules and understand them first. Still, you may really want to throw a rhetorical question in a conclusion or include a quote in an introduction: go right ahead. These things alone will not cause an essay to fail—indeed, your marker may like them. The Method is not intended to stifle creativity. But if you do write an essay that fails or doesn't get the marks you hoped for, that's okay. Go over it, look at the comments, find its weaknesses, and ask your tutor how it could have been improved. Then when you write your next essay, try to avoid where the previous one went wrong. The only way to improve is to learn from past mistakes.