

Colin Swatridge

A No-Nonsense Guide to Academic Writing

Colin Swatridge

**A NO-NONSENSE GUIDE TO
ACADEMIC WRITING**

ibidem
Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover photo: ID 100744388 © Krittiraj Adchasai | Dreamstime.com

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1839-7

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Hannover • Stuttgart 2024

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who commits any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Printed in the EU

A No-Nonsense Guide to Academic Writing

Contents

First words	Why 'no-nonsense'?	7
The essay/dissertation/thesis	What makes writing 'academic'? Why is it wise to think of an essay as a debate, not a manifesto?	8
The title	Your title is best thought of, at least initially, as a question.	13
The Introduction		17
Defining your terms	Here you make a statement of intent: define ambiguous terms in your title;	17
Limiting your scope	place limits on the scope, or focus, of your essay;	20
Stating your position	and state your own (perhaps intuitive) position.	22
Describing your methodology	What data will you collect and how will you collect it and use it? Why did you make the choices you made?	23
The received opinion		25
Sources	Why is it good debating practice to give a fair account of the case you seek to counter? How do you judge the worthwhileness of your sources?	29
Note-making	How will you record what you find in the sources that you might want to make use of?	34

Quotation	How and to what extent will you quote from those sources?	36
References	And how will you signal what sources you have used within the text of your essay?	38
Your counter-argument		42
Evidence	Being aware of possible bias; what sort of evidence will you look for and use to support your case?	43
Examples	The need for relevant examples,	45
Facts	and dependable facts.	47
Conclusion	How tentative should your conclusion be? Might you have changed your mind in the course of your research? Awareness of possible alternative conclusions.	49
Summary diagram		53
A (short) sample essay	'Does the fact that we have a concept of evil mean that evil exists?'	54
Notes		58
Index		74

First Words

This guide is for students of social science and humanities subjects who are required to write long, or long-ish, essays. Students of the sciences will need to look elsewhere for guidance.

I have in mind, particularly, students at the undergraduate and master's levels who have received little guidance in the past; who may be studying in unfamiliar surroundings at home or abroad, where expectations may not be made clear – or clear enough; and mature students who may be returning to study after a break.

Why do I call this short book a 'no-nonsense' guide? Students don't have time, or inclination, to read any more than they need to, so I wanted to keep the text to the minimum. There are no test-yourself exercises of the sort that clutter many 'How to Write Essays' books. In spite of the fact that 'academic writing' is in the title, I take the view that writing at the college and university level need be no different from 'good', clear writing in other domains.

You really only need to read to the end of page 40. There are eleven line-drawings to break up the text somewhat; and even the examples that I give don't all have to be read. Of course, I hope you will read them; none of them is very long, and they're all by distinguished writers.

The second part of the book (page 41 onwards) consists of notes related to the language (but not only the language) you might be expected to use – or avoid using. These notes are sign-posted at relevant points in the main text. If you're confident about your English, you can probably read them selectively or not at all.

The essay/dissertation/thesis

You've a long essay, dissertation, or thesis to write – anything between three and three hundred pages of 'academic writing'. I shall use the word 'essay' throughout, because an essay is a dissertation or thesis on a smaller scale. In all of them, one argues a case.

I'm guessing that you've either not had to do this before, or you've not had to write so many words, or so many pages, as you're having to write now. You're expected to write in a formal, academic style – the very words 'thesis', and 'dissertation', suggest formality – and this may be off-putting.

What's so special about *academic* writing? Some would say it should be 'difficult'; it should use long words, in long sentences **[Note 1]**, like this:

One critic has observed in Sibiescu's work the existence of a convergence correlation between the traditional and the modern: his expressionist poetics are said to be a generous synthesis of modernist avant-gardist art in respect of its form – setting it apart from tradition where its text rhetoric is concerned – but traditional in respect of its content, this being located, supposedly, in the ancestral foundations of our spirituality. The village, for Sibiescu, represents, as it were, a matrix space, where humanity reaches a plenitude, an ontological harmony, that surmounts the impasses and gnoseological aporias that make for alienation and a distancing from the 'mystery horizon'. Sibiescu's poetic universe converts the ontological status of the given real into the images of the paradisiacal or apollonian, evoking not merely the aesthetic, but also the existential sensibility.

Understood? Probably not, I scarcely understood it myself, at least on first reading. If the meaning of a text is unclear, if the language is almost wilfully unfamiliar, can we say it's well-written? Surely not.

Is this better?

One critic notes the interplay of the traditional and the modern in Sibiescu's poetry. Where its form is concerned, Sibiescu's poetic style is both pioneering – parting company with an old-fashioned vocabulary and word-order – and traditional in respect of its

content. The poems, that is, are said to evoke the deep religious feelings of our ancestors. For Sibiescu, the village is the context in which we humans are most fulfilled, and we are most at ease. It is in the village, where difficulties are overcome, and we are most 'at home'. The world of Sibiescu's poems is one where nature is ordered, even heavenly; where there is both beauty and a real feeling of *being* to the full.

If I haven't entirely captured the meaning of the original, it just goes to show how teasing the worst kind of 'academic' writing can be. (I didn't know what to make of the 'mystery horizon'). Academics, especially, for whom English is the second language tend to write like this. You needn't, and shouldn't.

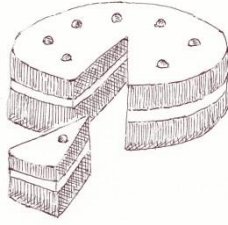
Still, there are some conventions you should bear in mind. You won't shorten 'will not' to 'won't, (as I'm doing in this guide); there won't be too much 'I this', and 'I that' [**Note 2**]; you'll use the same sort of language that you'll have come across in books and papers on your reading lists. It has a certain formality, an appropriate structure, and clear referencing – but that's about all there is to academic writing. **The important thing is to be clear.**

Use technical terms where necessary, but avoid *jargon*. 'Academic writing' should be accessible to the intelligent general reader.

*

Another reason why writing a long essay may be off-putting is the length, and the time the job will take: the reading, the taking notes, the talking to people (including your supervisor), the management of your material. It may all look like a rather indigestible cake.

Cut the cake into slices – several slices – and chew your way through each without thinking about all those to come. The first slice will undoubtedly be the reading of books, journals, and websites that have something to say about the topic you've chosen to write about. This reading may well cause you to alter the focus of your topic.



The next will be to draft a review of what you've read – the parts of what you've read, that is – most relevant to your title. It may take a while to pin down that title. This isn't time wasted; but the sooner you have your title, the clearer it will be to you how much of what you read is relevant and how much isn't.

*

If you're an undergraduate student you might have been assigned to write this essay. Were you given a choice of titles, at least? If you weren't, can you modify the title you've been given? You may well think of a given title as an instruction to reproduce what's been written by all your student predecessors. If you were given a title like:

The causes of the American Revolution

You might well think that all you need to do is to read the standard histories and list the causes, one by one, more or less quoting or paraphrasing what you read. It's all been done before; that you should have to do it, too, is a nuisance, a hurdle, or series of hurdles, to jump over. That's probably what it feels like.

If you're a student at the master's level, you'll have a supervisor with whom you'll negotiate a topic and title. In some traditions, a **dissertation** is generally the end point of a taught course; and a **thesis** is a more or less book-length essay, the product of quite intensive research. In others, it's the other way round. An 'essay' at any level should have something fresh to say; at the postgraduate level, it should aim to break new ground.

You'll need to be really quite interested in the subject you've chosen. You may have to live with your choice of subject for quite a long time, so you must really want to find an answer to the question that's on your

mind. If there's no such question you might as well play computer games.

I said that in an essay you argue a case. Let me argue this case:

However short or long your essay, dissertation, or thesis needs to be, and whether or not you chose the title, it's yours – it's for you to shape it. There's no right shape, no pre-ordained shape. It's a cliché, but the more you put into it, the more you'll get out of it – and, more to the point, the better it'll be.

Of course it's a chore if all you do is reproduce the thoughts of others; the point of writing an essay is to express thoughts of your own on the subject. It's your voice the reader wants to hear – or it should be. You're an adult: you've had thoughts and experiences to bring to the subject that others might not have had. Have the confidence to be a bit original.

The word 'essay' comes from the French verb *essayer*, to try. An essay is a trial of ideas. You're presenting the thoughts of others, of course you are; but it's for you either to differ from them in some small way, or to add thoughts of your own – in short, to *interpret* what you've found. Do you agree in every respect with what others have said on the subject? It's unlikely. You won't push the boundaries of our knowledge and understanding very far; but in offering your own interpretation, writing the essay's less of a chore for you, and less of a chore for your reader.

What is an argument? It's a claim for which you make a case. The **main claim** in the above argument is the first sentence (in a short argument, it often is). That claim then needs to be supported by one or more further claims, or **reasons**. I reckon I've given five reasons for making it *your* essay.

*

(We hear a lot about 'large language models' [LLMs], or generative AI, and ChatGPT in particular. You might have been tempted to short-circuit the essay-writing process by having AI write it for you. AI can't make the sort of judgments that you will be called upon to make; and it certainly can't answer the questions that might be put to you, orally, by a human being, once you've submitted work that isn't yours).

*

Behind the older use of the word ‘essay’ is the notion of weighing, which we preserve in the word ‘assay’ – we speak of assaying precious metals (is this really gold? how many carats?). To write an essay is to weigh ideas in the balance so as to determine which is the weightier – which has the more support.

An ‘academic’ essay is a **debate**, not a manifesto [**Note 3**]. Your thoughts are the more telling when they counter-balance a position with which you disagree.



The reasons you give will need to be supported by **evidence** of some sort. I didn’t give evidence for claims I made in the argument above; but (in a rather longer and perhaps more tedious argument) I might have drawn on personal experience [**Note 2**]: I’ve set essays, and examined them, at secondary, bachelor’s, and postgraduate levels. I’ve read an awful lot of essays (some awful, most of them not).

The claims having been weighed, you come to a **conclusion**. My conclusion is in the final sentence (‘offer your own interpretation’) – again, it often is. I didn’t prove or disprove anything, and nor will you. The most that can be hoped for is that your reader trusts you, and your handling of the evidence.

What follows is not prescriptive; it is suggestive. It is not *the* model of how to write a long essay; I hope, simply, to provide a route-map that you may find useful at the planning stage – a stage that may last quite a while and that, anyway, shouldn’t be rushed.

You shouldn’t be writing this essay on your own, especially not if you’re a postgraduate student: you have a supervisor to call on for help, and you’ve a right to expect that help. Your supervisor, though, has an equal right to expect you to be in the driving-seat.

The Title

Research – indeed, all knowledge – begins with a question: if there's no question, there's no answer, and no essay, no testing of ideas. Why might it be useful to frame the title as a question? I shan't argue for doing this – I'll simply give my reasons:

1. If you were presented with a title like 'The Idea of National Sovereignty', it would be difficult to judge where to begin and where to end.
2. A question ('What do we mean by sovereignty?') will help to determine what material is relevant – what goes some way to answering the question; and what isn't – what doesn't.
3. If it's your question you're answering ('Is sovereignty just another word for nationalism?'), the essay will be your answer, and not a mere re-presenting of others' answers.

The title of your essay need not be in the form of a question, but it will at least imply a question. Consider this title:

The advantages and disadvantages of a bicameral parliament

(A bicameral parliament is one that has two chambers, or two 'houses'). If the title 'The Causes of the American Revolution' might suggest that your essay will be in the form of a simple list, the above title might suggest two lists. In both cases, the result would be less an essay than a catalogue.

The issue might have occurred to you first as a question, e.g.:

Why should a parliament have two chambers?

If you're British, you might have wondered why there's a House of Lords (in which there are quite a lot of Ladies) in the Westminster parliament. The other three nations of the United Kingdom seem to manage with just one chamber. America has its Senate; France has its *Sénat*; Germany its *Bundesrat*. Why? Sweden, Finland, and Hungary have unicameral parliaments. Why? You'd need to look for reasons.

Here's an argument from an essay by Hilaire Belloc, member of parliament, writer of essays for a number of reviews, verse for children, and much else. He was writing in the 1920s and '30s:

The Crooked Streets

Why do they pull down and do away with the crooked streets, I wonder, which are my delight, and hurt no one?

Every day the wealthier nations are pulling down one or another in their capitals, and their great towns; they do not know why they do it, and neither do I.

It ought to be enough, surely, to drive the great broad highways which commerce needs and which are the arteries of a modern city, without destroying all the history and all the humanity in between – the islands of the past. The crooked streets are packed with human experience and reflect in a lively manner people's chances and misfortunes and expectations and homeliness and wonderment. One street marks a boundary, another the channel of an ancient stream, a third the track some animal took to cross a field, hundreds upon hundreds of years ago; another shows where a rich man's garden stopped long before the first ancestor his family can trace was born – the garden is now all houses, and its owner who took delight in it is just a name.



Leave people alone in their cities; do not pester them with the futilities of big government, or the fads of powerful men, and they will build you crooked streets, just as moles throw up mounds, and bees construct their honeycombs. There is no ancient city that does not glory, and that has gloried, in a multitude of crooked streets. There is no city, however devastated by government, if left alone, will not breed crooked streets in less than a hundred years and keep them for a thousand more.

Belloc is talking about the back-streets of old towns and cities, the chance result of unplanned circumstance. We'd probably talk about 'winding' streets now, rather than 'crooked' streets.

His title is a noun-phrase, but his first lines are a question. He's genuinely curious as to why characterful old streets should be bulldozed by town-planners to create grids with ninety-degree intersections, as if all cities must be laid out like 'downtown' Manhattan. There's indignation in that question of his. It fires his essay.

*

There's another rather crucial point to be made about your title: **keep it tight**. Consider this one:

Britain and the slave trade

It's too big; too open-ended. Where would you start? Even if it was a question:

How big was Britain's involvement in the slave trade?

Or: How much of Britain's wealth was based on the slave trade?

it's still a big-book-length enterprise. The topic could be further refined by localizing it:

Is Bristol (or Liverpool, or Manchester) what it is now because of the slave trade?

Or by time-limiting it:

Was the end of the slave trade in 1807 the end of Britain's involvement in slavery?

The tighter your title, the more you set limits to the number of relevant sources you'll need to read, or otherwise take into account, and the

more feasible your project will be. You'll be expected to have consulted a good spread of sources; still, the closer you stand up to a target the more likely it is you'll hit it.

Don't give yourself too much to read; the careful analysis of well-chosen sources is more impressive than a pages-long bibliography of the barely relevant.

It's important that you ask a question that's researchable, given the resources (including the time) that's available; and that it's a question you really want an answer to. It might even be a question that hasn't been asked before in quite the way you ask it.

(Notes:

1. There's something to be said for not worrying too much about the precise words of your title until it's clear what shape the essay's going to take. You may want to change the title more than once so that it fits what you've actually written.
2. I use **sub-titles** in this text: in a long essay, you'll probably do the same, breaking your argument into 'chapters'. You might say what you intend to cover, at the beginning of each chapter, and what you hope to have shown, at the end.
3. Check what is expected in your institution concerning **format**: 12-point Times New Roman, 1.5 spacing, and justification at the right-hand margin are fairly standard settings.)