

# Engineering Tripos IIA/IIB

## Essay writing skills

Matthew Jones & Emma Etteridge

# Structure of this session

- What are essays for?
- Before you start writing
- Starting writing
- Writing the essay
- Essay length
- Essay marking
- Essay questions in an exam
- Cribs for essay questions
- Further reading

# What are essays for?

1. To help develop your understanding of the topics covered
  - From passive to active knowledge
2. To demonstrate your understanding
  - Can you accurately reproduce the ideas presented in lectures and the literature?
  - Do you understand these ideas?
3. To demonstrate your ability to communicate
  - Can you organise these ideas into a coherent argument
4. To demonstrate critical thinking
  - Can you evaluate evidence
5. To get feedback

# Before you start writing – read the question!

- Before you begin work on your essay be sure you understand what is being looked for
  - If there are instructions, be sure to follow them
- Questions have normally been carefully designed to address a specific aspect of a topic
  - They have never been designed to trick you
- There is no right way to answer an essay, but lots of wrong ones
  - You will get poor marks if you just write about the topic in general, rather than the specific aspect that is referred to in the question
  - Do not try to second guess (or flatter) your markers
- *If in doubt, check with the course leader*

# Before you start writing – what to read

- Your essay [reading list](#) is a starting point
- Use [iDiscover](#) to find other related material
- Expand your reading by looking at current trends using articles from [FT](#) and [Economist](#).
- Finding online resources  
<https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/technologylibraries/online-resources>
- Finding literature to read  
<https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/technologylibraries/infoskills>

# Before you start writing – Focussed reading

## Don't

- Try to read everything
  - extract key points quickly by index reading - look up key words and read relevant passages
- Read consecutively
  - flick through relevant sections and try to identify relevant passages.

## Do

- Take active notes
  - Identify key arguments/ examples and how these relate to your work
- Ensure you understand context

# Starting writing – make a plan

- Organise your ideas
  - An essay should be a coherent argument, not a stream of consciousness
- Identify the most important points to be made
  - Work out a logical order in which to address them and how you can make the connections between them
  - Use this to check that you have covered all the points clearly when you have written the essay
  - Decide if any points you are considering could be omitted (because they are only marginally relevant)
- Identify material relevant to the points you want to discuss
  - Statements from the reading you have done
  - Examples

# Planning your essay - mindmapping

- Can help to use visual techniques to help structure your argument e.g. mindmapping (Tony Buzan)



[http://thegrammargang.blogspot.co.uk/2009\\_08\\_01\\_archive.html](http://thegrammargang.blogspot.co.uk/2009_08_01_archive.html)



# Writing an essay – structure 1

- An essay should typically contain four sections

## **1. Introduction (definition) - <10% of word count**

- Sets out the focus and scope of the essay and specifies your interpretation of any ambiguous words in the title
- It can explain the structure of the essay, but this is probably not necessary

## **2. Literature review (exposition)**

- Describes different perspectives in the literature on the topic
- You should summarise the key points in your own words, not copy large chunks from the suggested readings

# Writing an essay – structure 2

## 3. Discussion – maybe 50%+ of word count

- A review of the claims made in the literature (set out in the previous section)
  - This should draw on evidence to support, or counter, these claims, that may be derived from (in order of quality/credibility):
    - Relevant contemporary examples reported in newspapers eg *Financial Times*, or magazines eg *Economist*
    - Examples cited in the literature
    - Your own experience
- You should make clear where you got the evidence from by appropriate citation of sources

# Writing an essay – structure 3

## 4. Conclusion - <10% of word count

- Summarises the key points of the debate
- Identifies your conclusions on the balance of the argument
- If you believe that the evidence points clearly to one particular position being correct then you can state this, but it is also acceptable to suggest that there is evidence to support both sides

# Writing an essay – detailed structure

- Essays should be written in continuous prose
  - Don't use bullet points unless you are itemising a specific list
- Break the text up
  - don't need section (sub)headings
    - but paragraphs help comprehension
- Signposting
  - Orient the reader throughout the essay
  - Work on transitions between paragraphs/sentences
- Spell check (including proper nouns)

# Paragraphs

- Try to make sure that each paragraph has a purpose
- What do you want to achieve in it in terms of moving your argument forward?
- Typical paragraph pattern:
  - Link sentence to the argument so far, & introduce new idea/segment
  - Provide evidence for the new bit of the argument
  - Give some sense of what this means for the argument
  - [Set up transition to next paragraph]

# Writing an essay – academic style

- . Be tentative
  - . “may be”, “appears to be”, “suggests” rather than “is”
- . Be precise and specific
  - . Use technical language, give examples
- . Use formal language (no slang, avoid contractions)
  - . e.g. “cannot” rather than can’t
- . Use impersonal language
  - . “It is argued” rather than “I believe”
- . Use powerful reporting words
  - . e.g. describe, contend, examine, state, disagree, observe, assert, support, claim, dispute, suggest, dismiss, propose, concur, recommend, object, contradict

These are general guidelines. Some essays may require a different style

# Academic style: “signalling” words

- Supporting
  - similarly, likewise, equally, in the same way
- Strengthening
  - in addition, besides, moreover, furthermore, not only... but also
- Challenging
  - others argue that ..., alternatively, conversely, in contrast
- Rebutting
  - however, on the other hand, nonetheless, yet, at odds with
- Identifying implications
  - as a result, as a consequence, hence, thus, therefore, evidently, it follows that, it should be clear that
- Summarising
  - that is, in short, to summarise, finally

# Writing an essay – what not to do

- make things up
  - if you have no evidence, or sources, to support your argument, change, or appropriately qualify, the claims you make
- use cliché. exaggeration, rhetorical questions
- present your opinion as fact
  - your opinion is irrelevant unless you can substantiate it (or you are specifically asked to give it)
- if you can't show that evidence or sources support your opinions they shouldn't be part of your argument
- leave it to the last minute



# Writing an essay – references

- When referring to material in your essay add a **citation**
- At the end of your essay, list all the **References** that you have used
- Use [Cite Them Right](#) to help you reference.

Information you need for a good reference

- the names and initials of the author(s)
- the year of publication

<b>Book</b>	<b>Journal</b>
Title of the book	Title of the article
Name & city of the publisher	Title of the journal
	Volume & page numbers

# Writing an essay – plagiarism

- Copying material from sources, even if you change some words or the order of the words, is plagiarism and will be penalised if detected
- If you need to quote from a source then this should be clearly indicated by quotation marks and a reference (with page numbers)
- See  
<https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/technologylibraries/infoskills>  
<http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/plagiarism/>

# How long should a supervision essay be?

There is no “right” length for a supervision essay. It depends what you are aiming to achieve

- A review essay attempts to cover the topic in depth including as much relevant theoretical and empirical material as possible. This can be a useful resource for subsequent revision
- A timed essay can be useful to see how much you can cover in the 45 minutes that you will have in the exam and to practice exam writing technique

In practice, essays are likely to fall somewhere between these extremes, but remember that it is important always to answer the question as set and not to pad things out with irrelevant material.

# How long should an assessed essay be?

- You will normally be given a specific maximum word count for an assessed essay
- If you can answer the question well in fewer words you will not be penalised (indeed this is a valuable skill)
  - significantly shorter essays, however, tend to feel “thin”
  - but don't pad essays out with waffle as you will not gain more marks for this
  - and make sure that you answer the (whole) question
- More usually the problem is too many words
  - there is no formal rule on how much you can exceed the word limit without penalty
  - more than 5-10% is likely to be noticeable
  - exceeding this is likely to be penalised

# Essay marking

Supervisors may not give you marks for your essays (to avoid misleading expectations), but

- in general, marks for essay questions tend to have a similar mean, but smaller standard deviation than quantitative questions
- provided you give a reasonable answer to the question as set (i.e. not simply write down everything you know about a topic) then you should get a II.II mark or higher
- It is very rare for an essay question to receive marks above 85% and even a first class essay will often receive a mark in the 70s

Markers are generally looking to give you marks for an essay question (rather than take them away for errors, as in a quantitative question)

my world is your world?

but does this have to be the case?

but this is precisely what was explained in class

Why was this?

i.e.?

so how might we understand this?

What does itter actually say?

# Marking essays – what is being looked for?

Answers to essay questions should be clear, accurate, relevant to the question set and supported by appropriate use of evidence and examples. Additionally, credit is given where the following are displayed:

- effective organisation and prioritisation of material, usually on the basis of a theme or argument. A collage of information with no coherent argument should be avoided.
- clear and logical analysis of theory used to advance the analysis
- knowledge of relevant lecture material and related literature
- effective and appropriate use of personal experience
- originality in discussion and analysis

# Marking essays - characteristics

A **First class** answer demonstrates excellent knowledge and understanding of the material and displays most of the requirements referred to on the previous slide

An **Upper Second** class answer shows a good grasp of the material and an ability to detect underlying assumptions, to adopt a critical stance and to see interconnections between different ideas. It does not, however, show the depth of knowledge and insight that distinguishes the First class answer

A **Lower Second** class answer is for the most part an accurate, but descriptive account. Rehearsed material may be reproduced that is only partly relevant or poorly organised or unclear. If there is originality or insight it is not sufficient to compensate for incomplete, superficial or erroneous features of the answer

A **Third class** answer displays a basic familiarity with the material, but is incomplete and shows errors of understanding.



# Essay questions in exams: 1

You will only have about 45 minutes to answer each question in the exam

- This is not a lot of time/words
- So make sure that everything counts

You won't be expected to remember detailed references

- but you will be expected to give the names of key theorists and to be able to present evidence/examples in support of your argument

Exam questions may include several elements

- Make sure that you answer all elements
- Pay attention to the proportion of marks for each element (where indicated)

# Essay questions in exams: 2

Exam essay questions are designed to test

- Descriptive knowledge
- Analytical skill
- Critical awareness
- Ability to develop and structure an extended argument

There is often an open-ended part of the question that is used to offer good candidates a chance to demonstrate flair

- Simply repeating accurately what you were told in lectures may get a II.ii mark
- An accurate answer with evidence of additional reading may get a II.i
- A first class answer demonstrates insight and originality

# Essay questions in exams: 3

- Plan your essay before you write it
  - Get the brain dump out of the way
  - 5 minutes of planning can avoid time wasted in repetition and incoherent argumentation
  - Leave your plan in the answer book
  - If you run out of time it might encourage a marker to give you the benefit of the doubt if it shows you know the topic
- Try to spend roughly the same amount of time on each question
- It is difficult to get enough extra marks on a “long” essay to compensate for an incomplete, “short” essay
- If you are running out of time give brief notes/bullet points showing how you would have completed the answer

# Cribs for essay questions

- There are cribs for management essay questions on the Teaching Office website
  - but these vary widely in their level of detail
    - they provide an indication of what was being looked for
  - useful to check if you have understood the question
  - but they do not constitute the “right answer”

# Checklist: Your essay should

- answer the question
- show you have read widely
- demonstrate you have evaluated the evidence
- prove you understand the question
- have a clear argument
- be well structured and organised
- contain relevant information to support your argument
- use consistent and accurate referencing
- conform to academic style and be easy to read
- be professionally presented
- be grammatically correct
- have been proofread for mistakes

# Common weaknesses

- The essay does not fully or directly address the question
- The essay is hard to follow (no signposts, poor structure, no 'set-up')
- The essay is poorly organised (no structure, or flow of argument)
- The essay is too anecdotal (not supported by evidence or references)
- It is not clear that the student understands and has engaged critically with the topic (superficial, descriptive)
- The literature is misunderstood or described too simplistically
- The essay is hard to read (typos, very long or very short paras)
- + Not enough sources, too reliant on few sources, internet sources, rushed, colloquial/cliches

# Further Reading

There are a number of books on essay writing in Departmental and College libraries e.g.

- Greetham, B (2001) *How to Write Better Essays* Palgrave
- Hennessey, B (2000) *Writing an Essay* Oxford
- Redman, P (2001) *Good Essay Writing* Sage
- Baker, C & Vermeer, R (2007) *Writing better essays* OU Hong Kong Press. [https://idiscover.lib.cam.ac.uk/permalink/f/8p41kq/44CAM\\_ALMA51622048470003606](https://idiscover.lib.cam.ac.uk/permalink/f/8p41kq/44CAM_ALMA51622048470003606)
- Levin, P (2009) *Write great essays* Open University Press  
[https://idiscover.lib.cam.ac.uk/permalink/f/8p41kq/44CAM\\_ALMA51619773830003606](https://idiscover.lib.cam.ac.uk/permalink/f/8p41kq/44CAM_ALMA51619773830003606)

These websites may also be helpful:

- <https://emedia.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/writing-skills>
- <http://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/writing-essays/>
- <http://davidgauntlett.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/essaywriting.pdf>
- <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/essay-planning.html>
- <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/skillshub/?id=256>



ANY  
QUESTIONS?

