Essay Writing and Assessment Guide

In the course of your time at King’s you will have the chance to tackle many different forms of assessment. These include sitting examinations, creating portfolios, making oral presentations, participating in class, and writing essays. This guide focuses on writing essays because the skills you develop as an essay writer enhance your ability to succeed in other forms of assessment.

The essay is much more than a means of assessing your progress at College. It is the centrepiece of all academic work in the Arts and Humanities. And it is also a medium through which to develop a full range of transferable, vocational skills.

This may not be obvious. The kinds of questions you will be asked to answer by means of an essay may seem very specialised, even wholly removed from everyday life. But the first thing to remember is that an essay is not about getting the question right or wrong. Rather, it is about persuading readers of your authority as a writer and of the value of what you are advocating. These skills are indispensable at every stage of your future career. So the skills you develop when writing essays will not only help you get a job, they will allow you to excel in your chosen career.

Your time at King’s College London is a precious opportunity to acquire and hone essay-writing skills. Your lecturers, tutors, and seminar leaders are practised and successful writers. They will support you over the course of your degree as you develop your critical thinking and writing skills. This will set in train processes of learning which will continue to develop throughout your working life.

The Essay

The essay is both a distinct and a capacious genre. The word derives from Latin meaning ‘weighing out’ and Old French meaning ‘to test’, ‘try’ or ‘make an attempt’. You’ll note it does not mean ‘answering correctly’ or ‘getting it right’.

Now by reason of your acceptance into a BA or an MA English programme at King’s College London, your excellent skills as a writer have already been recognised: thanks to your hard work at school (and, for MA students, in your BA) you are already an accomplished writer. There is still plenty for you to learn, though, about how to write in a clear, authoritative, and persuasive manner. (No one ever stops learning how to write: ask any author.) At College you will learn more about how to the find evidence to support your argument, how to marshal that evidence so as best to make your case, and how to reference it in such a way as to give assurance of your knowledge, show your originality, and ‘drive home’ the importance of your ideas.

You may have written many essays, but as an undergraduate student you have probably not read many. It’s useful to realise that opinion pieces and book/play/film reviews in newspapers and magazines are rarely essays in the academic sense; they conform to different conventions, quite appropriately, as they are directed to different readerships. The difference between journalistic opinion pieces and
academic essays is easy to see once you have read more academic essays. In fact one of the best ways to learn about academic essay-writing is simply to read academic essays. Often, as part of your preparatory reading for a seminar, you will be asked to seek out articles in academic journals. Try to get into the habit of secondary reading from the outset – this will make you a better researcher and writer.

One of the extraordinary things about writing essays is that drafting them is a form of thinking. As a result you never know what you are going to end up thinking by writing essays. If you are open to this process you will be amazed at the thoughts your brain thinks for you while you are writing. They'll seem to pop out of nowhere (and they won’t only be about the topic in hand).

**Getting Started**

Spend some time **thinking about the question** and analyse what it is asking of you. If you are writing your own title, be sure it offers the reader a clear indication of your objective and the scope of your essay.

Then start **brainstorming**. What are your initial ideas about the topic? Some students find a mind map or spider diagram helpful at this point. Try to think of counter-arguments so you can really think round the topic. Identify areas that you need to research further and consider in more detail.

Next you can begin **gathering material**. This will come from reading primary texts, lecture and seminar notes and secondary sources (e.g. books, journal articles, online resources). It is often useful to get a handle on your own ideas about a primary text first; but particularly when there are quantities of critical material on a particular writer or topic, it may be more effective to get a feel for other peoples' published ideas first. This is not least because it might save you time, i.e. prevent you re-inventing the wheel. You may even prefer to do a bit of both; the choice is yours. For secondary material look at module reading lists and use the library and online resources. Be focused so you have enough time for your own writing. Keep careful notes of quotations, page numbers and bibliographic details so you have these to hand for your references. In referring to secondary material, you are showing how your ideas about a primary text (or texts) interact with other people’s published work on the same texts/topic.

If you find that a critic has already published an idea relevant to your own, you can use her/his work to support your argument; or if s/he has argued the opposite, this might spur you on to consolidate your case. Engaging with this other writing will give complexity and colour to your own argument. **In all cases you must reference other work appropriately** (see **Referencing and Style Guide**). Indeed another key skill you will develop in essay-writing is the ability to avoid plagiarism (the unacknowledged use of another person’s words or ideas).

You are strongly advised to familiarise yourself with the College’s statement on **Academic Honesty and Integrity** (click on ‘View/Download pdf file), which also contains a statement about plagiarism. This is something we will discuss in detail with you during your first year in the Department. Remember you can always consult your Personal Tutor—or any staff member in her/his office hours—if you are unsure
about whether you might have plagiarised in a particular instance. By starting your essay early and planning research time you should easily avoid accidental plagiarism.

Before you start writing the essay, it is important to make a plan. This involves selecting and organising your ideas into a sequential argument which uses a new paragraph for each new idea. Think of the plan as a map of the essay which will guide you as you write. It will show you where particular quotations will be discussed and analysed. The plan will indicate how many paragraphs you have, the function of each one and how you’ll get from one paragraph to the next. Keep the question in mind at all times.

Now think about your argument. This really is the key to successful essay writing. Your argument will answer the question you’ve been set and outline your position on that topic. Try to summarise your argument in one or two sentences. It will usually appear in your introduction and bear it in mind in the conclusion.

Now you are ready to start writing. Some students choose to write the introduction last, but whenever you write it, be sure it is engaging, concise and avoid generalisations about cultures or peoples (‘The Age of Shakespeare was the age of...’; ‘The spirit of the nineteenth century was...’, ‘Aboriginal peoples have always...’, ‘For thousands of years man has struggled with the written word’). Offer the reader relevant introductory material to set the scene for the essay to come: e.g. contextual information, a sense of what will be covered in the essay, your particular argument and approach. Aim to catch the reader’s attention and be bold. It can be better to avoid phrases like ‘In this essay I will....’ as they can seem repetitive. Ideally begin the final draft with a pithily expressed opinion about the primary texts that also answers the question. Where you have been asked to compare two primary texts, both should appear in the introduction. As you write the main body of the essay keep the argument close to the surface, summarise one point before moving on to the next, and give each main idea a full paragraph. The conclusion is important; try not to let the essay fizzle out. The conclusion may sum up your points or provide a final perspective on your topic. Remind the reader of the journey they have been on and what you have shown them. Avoid conclusions that merely repeat the introduction. Try to use different phrasing. It’s fine to gesture to further questions or aspects of the topic.

Leave time for re-drafting, editing and proofreading. At this point it’s a great idea to read your essay aloud. Overly long or clunky sentences will be immediately apparent. It’s also a good idea to leave time so you can put the essay aside for a day or two and come back to it afresh.

Have another look at the Arts and Humanities Faculty marking criteria and also the Department’s ‘How We Mark Essays’ guidance document.

Double check the assignment instructions (e.g. word length).

Always number the pages of your essay. Always double space, and use 12 font, ‘normal’ margins in Word, and usually Times New Roman.

As you edit, check for the following:
-the order of your paragraphs
Be ruthless – edit out clichés or generalisations. Be precise but also creative in your thinking and your writing style. Engage your reader!

Using Libraries

For humanities students (you!), spending time in libraries reading is the equivalent to what spending time in the lab or doing fieldwork is for scientists: core activity.

During your time at King’s College London you have several wonderful libraries at your disposal: the Maughan Library in Chancery Lane, the University of London’s Senate House Library at Russell Square, and even the British Library in Euston Road. You also have the right to use other College libraries within the University of London federation. The COPAC catalogue merges online catalogues from all of these, and many other major specialist libraries. See [http://copac.ac.uk/](http://copac.ac.uk/)

Click on the drop-down links below for more information on accessing these libraries, finding relevant resources, maximising your time as a reader and developing critical reading skills.

Maughan Library, KCL

See [http://www.kcl.ac.uk/library/index.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/library/index.aspx)

The Maughan library is part of King’s College London’s Library Services and is a lending library. The library is in the Grade II listed building in Chancery Lane that formerly housed the Public Records Office. The library has been beautifully refurbished and offers a very pleasant work space 8 minutes’ walk from the Strand campus. For more information see [http://www.kcl.ac.uk/iss/](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/iss/).

Access: your King’s College London student card is also your Maughan library card. Any problems see the KCL’s Libraries Help and Guidance.

Senate House Library, University of London

See [http://www.ull.ac.uk/](http://www.ull.ac.uk/)

The Senate House Library is a wonderful research library. The rooms on the main (fourth) floor are beautiful and on all floors you will discover desks tucked away with superb views over London. The Senate House Library is a lending library.

**Access:** take your King’s College London student card to the fourth floor of the Senate House tower and apply for a card at the front desk.

The British Library
See http://www.bl.uk/

The British Library on Euston Road is an incomparable resource and, particularly in your final BA year, or for postgraduate research, you should make use of its amazing collections and superb work environment while enrolled at King’s.

Access: Although the BL is increasingly accessible, it is wise to be able to state the exact nature of your research (traditionally one was required to have exhausted the resources of College and University libraries before using it). For this reason it is more likely you will seek out the British Library in your final year of a BA (particularly if you elect to write a dissertation) or at MA level.

So if you have good reason to be at the British Library and not elsewhere, apply for a BL reader’s pass. The most accurate information on how to do so is found on the BL’s website. But be aware you will need your KCL student card and probably two other proofs of identity which have your current address on them.

Once you have a reader's card, to avoid waiting for deliveries, you can order books from home to be waiting for you when you arrive at the library. Note also the British Library has free Wi-Fi for registered readers.

**Online Reading Lists**

Modules taught in the Department of English now have online reading lists, a compendium of links to the full text or the physical location of all the required and further reading relevant to the topic at hand. But you should also get into the habit of looking for relevant material yourself, not least because life after university does not come with a reading list! Hence information in this and the following sections shows you how to become something more than a clicker on prescribed links: you’ll be a reading-list creator for (and of) yourself.

**Subject searches in catalogues**

Often when visiting the library you know what book or journal title you are looking for, in which case you can go straight to the catalogue and put the title into the appropriate search field. But other times you may be unsure where to start looking for material addressing a particular subject. In that case you should make use of ‘subject’ searches in catalogues, and bibliographic databases.

**ISS Catalogue**

You first port of call should still be the catalogue. http://library.kcl.ac.uk/ALEPH/-/start/kings

Under ‘Basic Search’, choose ‘subject words’ from the drop-down options and then enter appropriate topics in the search field, e.g. Shakespeare women. A number of titles held at the Maughan will then be listed. Don’t forget to try other subject combinations if it doesn’t work at first.
Databases

But more detailed bibliographic information and, increasingly, full texts of journal articles, are available via the Library Services databases. ‘Bibliographic’ databases allow you to search for various subjects (e.g. *Bleak House*) and provide information on where you will find articles and books that address it. You will then need to find the hard copy of the book or the journal in which the article appears. Full text databases contain the whole journal article in electronic form.

Many of the ISS databases are accessible at home via the ISS website. You may need your King’s user name and password, supplied when you received email information on arrival at the College.

- Go to Library Services
- Click on ‘Databases’ field
- The subsequent page reverts to the ‘Title’ field: if you know the title of the required database, enter it here
- If you do not know the title of an appropriate database, click on the ‘Subject’ tag
- In the left column click on ‘Arts + Humanities’. Click on the appropriate subject in the right column (e.g. ‘English’) and click on ‘Go’. A list of databases will appear with descriptions of their contents and information about what passwords are required for remote access. (If you are working in a PAWS room you shouldn’t need a further password.)
- It is VERY useful to familiarise yourself with these various databases, and you can only really do so by simply having a shot at making them work. Start with JSTOR, entering various relevant subjects in the search field or simply browsing through the site. (Why not timetable a few one-hour sessions for yourself to try this from home or at the library?)
- Note that there are also extraordinary primary resources available here: for example, you can browse, search, and read many historic newspapers and magazines. If you are taking a module involving pre-1900 texts you will learn much simply by browsing newspapers from the period: it’s interesting apart from anything else.

*Senate House catalogue and databases*

The Senate House Library catalogue can be found at [http://www.ull.ac.uk/](http://www.ull.ac.uk/)

The link to Senate House databases is in the left-hand column of the same page. Note you may need your Senate House Library card number to access some of its electronic resources externally.

*Finding books in the library*

This is a simple and familiar matter of finding the call number for a particular title from the online catalogue and finding where the book is shelved.
To find books or journals at the Maughan you will need the call number AND the room in which those call numbers are stored. Maughan Library floor plans are freely available and indicate the call numbers in each particular room.

If you can get the book yourself, as you can for the most part at the Maughan and Senate House, browse along the shelves. The book has been catalogued according to subject and will probably be sitting beside other relevant works.

Open access online resources

A number of respected academic journals are now available in open access online (i.e. not only via a database) as are a large number of historic literary texts. Do remember to treat all material found online (other than in full text academic databases) with an appropriate degree of critical distance. Is it an authoritative source? Is it an appropriate source to use? What makes you think so? Does it engage with the debates related to this subject as they unfold in printed references, such as books and scholarly articles? Can it be referred to in isolation from these other sources? Avoid using Wikipedia as a source in your essays!

Other Forms of Assessment

The information in this part of the handbook is concerned principally with essay-writing, but there are ways in which its suggestions can be adapted for other assessment modes. All assessment modes will, in some way, ask you to show your knowledge of a body of texts and on the critical field of discussion of them; that is, to exercise skills of close reading and contextual analysis. However, other assessment modes do stretch and test skills and approaches which the traditional essay cannot.

Examinations

Exams test your ability to work under time pressure and may also ask you to assess previously unseen material. Exams typically also test the extent of your knowledge of the material covered in a particular module: you need to demonstrate you have read and thought about several texts in the context of the course.

Before the exam

Make sure you know exactly where and when the exam is being held and how long it will take you to get there, allowing extra time for transport delays. Get plenty of sleep the night before. And check the exam regulations so you know what to do if something goes wrong on the day (like you are unexpectedly ill).

Preparation

A ‘prior disclosure’ exam (where you know what the questions will be ahead of time) enables you to choose the questions, plan the answers and look up the quotations in
advance. It is never a good idea to write full answers and try to memorise them: if you are focussed on memorising, you won't be having new thoughts. Instead, concentrate on thinking through the plan and its implications. You should go into the exam excited about realising the potential of the answer you have planned, not trying to remember an answer word-for-word.

For an ‘unseen’ exam (where you don’t know what the questions will be before the exam), you need to prepare in advance to ensure that your knowledge and understanding of the material are sufficient to meet the exam’s requirements. It’s always a good idea to look at past papers and ask your tutor for guidance on the structure of the exam, i.e. how many questions you need to answer and of what type. When revising, make sure you are familiar with a wide enough range of texts to give you some flexibility in choosing which questions to answer. All up flexibility and preparedness are keys to success in an exam, allowing you to feel secure in the thinking you will do in the exam. This will enable your answer to come across as fresh and interesting to your examiners. It will also ensure you answer the specific question you have chosen in the exam.

*Once in the exam*

Despite the time pressures, the first thing to remember in any exam is not to panic. Think to yourself, 'I can answer this question [you can!], and I can do so in a logical and informed manner'. So try not to rush the planning of your individual answers and your examination paper overall: it’s a good way of calming yourself down and reminding yourself you know more about the topic than you care to admit.

Secondly, make sure you have understood the exam’s ‘rubric’ (the instructions) correctly: how many texts should you refer to in each question, and in total? Can you refer to the same texts in two different sections of the exam?

Thirdly, and most importantly, make sure you do answer the question you have selected. A beautifully organised, well-written exam essay that does not answer the question cannot be rewarded with good marks.

As regards presentation, write on every other line so that you can make revisions without turning your script into a mass of crossings out and miniscule insertions. Remember if your examiners can’t read your answer, they can’t give you credit for it. (But also make sure you do cross out anything which you do not want to be marked!)

*Writing ‘standard’*

Your examiners’ expectations are moderated when reading an exam answer compared to coursework: they understand that an exam answer is more like an early draft than a polished essay. Even so you should still aim for clear writing, a logical structure, a coherent argument and an accurate account of the texts. Planning helps!

*Secondary references*

In most examinations you will not be able to reproduce quotes from secondary sources as accurately as you would need to in an essay. Note that while minor
inaccuracies in quotations are acceptable, ideas taken from critical texts still need to be credited: it is possible to plagiarise in an exam. As long as you can identify the critical source clearly (say by the author’s name and the title of the book), precise publication details and page references are not required.

**Dissertations**

Some BA students will elect to do a dissertation in their final year (in place of two optional modules). This will involve developing a research topic and a plan in consultation with a supervisor, meeting with the supervisor on some occasions to discuss progress, and completing a 10,000 word dissertation successfully and on time. All MA students write dissertations (mostly 15,000 words) which are due at the end of summer, and are likewise developed under one-to-one supervision.

More information on the BA dissertation will be provided if you elect to do one, and MA students receive guidance on their dissertations throughout their enrolment. In the meantime, it’s best to think of a dissertation as an amalgamation of smaller essays but with an overarching argument. The latter means the argument of a 10,000 word dissertation should be more complex than the argument of two 5000 word essays put together, and you need to allow even more time for researching, revising and rethinking your work than you would for a ‘normal’ essay.

You will also undoubtedly develop new ideas in the course of writing the dissertation and need to check whether these can be logically integrated with the ideas you started with; you may even find that you need a fundamental rethink of the content or structure. All this takes time, so plotting a realistic schedule for working on your dissertation is crucial, bearing in mind that you will have other essays due at the same deadline.

(By the way, all this usually means that there are better plans than setting out to do all the reading before beginning to write a dissertation: the longer you leave starting to write, the more daunting it seems, and more tempting it is to procrastinate by reading just one more critical essay. Reading in the intervals of writing is usually a better option.)

Remember you will have had much experience in essay-writing before taking on the dissertation!

**Commentary**

Typically, a commentary is a close reading exercise asking you to focus on a short text. It may not be necessary to refer to critical reading. Examiners will be looking for the richness and subtlety of your reading of the primary text. An argument of the polemical kind may not be necessary, but you should aim for coherence.

**Portfolios**

Some modules ask you to develop a series of short critical responses to various readings over the course of the semester. Each entry may be short and focused on a
particular text, but some of the skills outlined in this guide—such as critical reading, planning, and re-drafting—should also assist you with preparing your portfolio.