

## ESSAY WRITING: A PERSONAL VIEW

by David Rayside

Competent writing is a hallmark of an educated person, and will be expected in just about every occupation you find for yourself. Essay preparation gives you an opportunity to explore a specific topic in depth and apply your communication skills to a serious enterprise. Even the most informal writing requires care in the use of language. Academic writing needs special care in the choice of words, in the use of concepts, and in the construction of argument, though it does not require a sacrifice of engaging and accessible prose. There is no magic to good writing, and no one is predestined to be good or bad at it. Everyone has the capacity to radically improve the quality of their communication, and everyone should!

Writing well is hard work. There is no magic to it, and no single formula. It almost always involves piecing together a complex array of facts and ideas, and then re-drafting until the structure of the argument is clear, the language used to convey it precise and convincing, and the overall work engaging. A famous novelist once said that effective writing is 10 percent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration. When you read the writing of talented novelists or scholars, you may think that their writing is quick and effortless, but those who do the creating will usually tell you the opposite.

Over the course of your undergraduate or graduate education, your writing will face a wide range of readers, some of them with very particular ideas about what constitutes a good essay. There are some contrasts between academic disciplines in what counts as typical term work, and some differences between countries and cultures over what makes for proper form. There are, nevertheless, some general lessons which we can all learn about writing, organizing, and arguing. If you have learned how to improve your essay work in an English course, or for a particular professor and TA, chances are it will help you in everything else. There is nothing unique about good political science writing.

An essay can be guided by a variety of objectives. It can be focused on working out and presenting an argument, after weighing different sides of a debate. It can analyze a text -- an argument presented by someone else -- to unravel its parts and explore their bases. It can compare things, looking for similarities and differences and explaining the origins or consequences of those similarities and differences. It can be framed around a question rather than an argument or thesis. Most essays in political science are designed to argue a point, to unravel the complexity of a phenomenon, and to reveal your grasp of the ideas at hand. And remember that you have to convey all this to someone who is not directly wired to your brain. That means writing in a manner that creates some confidence on the reader's part that you understand what you have been researching and thinking about.

An essay should reflect **your** thinking and **your** struggle with the source material and the ideas evoked by the essay topic. But of course it is difficult to be completely original, and few people manage it in their work. What you **can** strive for is to discover for yourself the contributions of various authors to a particular subject and weigh them carefully in coming to a reasoned conclusion. Some essay writers do have an opportunity to explore ground only rarely covered before, and can therefore create an original

mapping of that ground. There is also a kind of discovery and creativity in generating your own particular synthesis of arguments made by others on already well-researched terrain. Clarifying the complexity of an issue and communicating it effectively require artistry and technique.

## TOPICS

Choosing an essay topic can be one of the most difficult parts of the creative process. You may be supplied with a topic list, in which case you ought to select something which you think you would be capable of tackling, and something which interests you. In many such cases, you will be given the option of adopting a particular angle on an assigned topic, or focussing on only one case study under a broader rubric. You may have an opportunity to select your own essay topic, in which case a near-infinite choice offers itself. If there is that kind of choice, you should think of what political phenomena or political questions which appear in the media or which affect you in everyday life most interest you. Or, if you are examining the politics of non-Canadian political systems, you may try to think about what interests you here in Canada and then inquire as to whether a question arising out of those concerns can be shaped for application elsewhere. Another way of seeking inspiration about a topic is to browse through some of the required reading with a view to finding some question or issue that is particularly engaging to you.

When choosing a topic, remember that you are writing an essay and not a book. The scope should be manageable and the objective focused. You may not be able to get to that point right away, since some research may be needed in order to find out what particular questions or arguments are most important or relevant to you, but you should develop a focus as soon as possible. Only then will you have a clear view of what research to undertake and of how to begin writing. Keep in mind the difference between a topic area, such as “the women’s movement in Canada” or “AIDS policies in Latin America,” and a workably focused topic, such as “feminist influence on Canada’s child care policy” or “explaining Brazil’s leading role in developing AIDS prevention initiatives.”

Some essay topics state an argument -- perhaps a controversial one (e.g. “Canadians are no more embracing of racial diversity than Americans are”). You should organize arguments and evidence in favour of and opposed to such a claim, and arrive at as reasoned a conclusion as you can. You may take one side over the other, but you must at least deal with the most obvious arguments on the other side: otherwise you leave yourself open to easy refutation by any reader. If you find yourself having difficulty coming to a definitive conclusion about any controversy, don't panic. There may well be no clear answers even to relatively straightforward questions about **what** has happened, let alone to more elusive questions about **why**. In topics involving major theoretical or philosophical disputes, a reasonable instructor is unlikely to expect you to have sorted out definitively where you stand. As long as you are able to clearly delineate opposing views and explore the reasons for disagreement, you have made an analytical contribution.

Some essay topics will more focussed on explaining a particular outcome (for example, the origins of violent ethnic conflict in a particular setting), and will seek a display of evidence and logic in sorting out

cause and effect, though there will still be analytical differences among interpreters about what factors are most important. As in topic areas more explicitly centred on debate, you will discover that equally knowledgeable experts have contrasting views. Your job will be to weigh them and decide which of the points they make are the most relevant and convincing.

Some of the debates and disagreements among specialists in your area revolve around major theoretical disputes in the discipline or in the broader intellectual world; other differences in view come from contrasting readings of empirical evidence. Competent essay work requires that you read widely enough and think deeply enough that you gain some sense of that variety and struggle with the opposing views. Avoidance of that leads to the misleading conclusion that all political scientists agree, or to the equally dangerous conclusion that answering serious questions about social and political phenomena is a simple process of uncovering facts or logical constructions about which all reasonable people agree. It just isn't so.

Remember that every worthwhile essay is an analytical piece: it does not simply describe things. Implicit in every essay topic is a question -- a "how" or a "why." When thinking analytically, try not to assume that you know the right answer. You are certainly entitled to enter into any intellectual exercise with a strongly felt point of view. But the learning process, at any age or stage of scholarly development, requires that you be open to surprise, and to points of view different from your own. Even if you end up with a view similar to that which you began with, you owe it to yourself and others to be analytically rigorous enough to test those views against the arguments of others and the evidence they marshal. The recognition of complexity and the admission of doubt are all central to the development and exchange of ideas.

## **RESEARCH**

Some essays, particularly in political theory, will ask you to focus your attention on a primary text -- to explore and reflect upon its meaning. You may need additional sources to help sort out interpretations of important terms, but most of your time will be spent with the text itself. Most essays, though, will expect you to explore a wide range of published materials dealing with your particular topic. Course materials may include some specific recommendations about bibliography alongside the essay topics, and there may be additional readings listed in sections of the syllabus related to your topic area. You may also find that course texts have bibliographies which will help get you started in uncovering the relevant literature and finding out who are the major writers in the field. In any event, a certain amount of overview reading makes sense in helping you figure out a topic or place it in broad context.

The internet can be of tremendous help in research. Access can be had to the web sites of relevant institutions, to media outlets, and to countless other sources of information. There is invaluable information and analysis available in government reports, documentation provided by political parties and non-governmental organizations. But remember where the material is coming from as you assess its reliability or its implicit frameworks. The same is true if you are using internet newspaper sites: some media outlets can be worthy sources of information and analysis and others are not. You need to know

who or what group or institution is creating the material you use, and you have to think about whether they have a stake in providing you with a filtered view. There is a vast quantity of material compiled by people with no obvious expertise, much else produced by people with strong prejudice and a vested interest in a particular perspective, and a great deal of it couched in terms that sound sophisticated.

Even if you are using only scholarly cites (for example library collections or electronic indices for academic journals), finding the right information and analysis can be tricky. Even skillful searching risks turning up material that is only marginally relevant to you, and purely electronic searching can all-too-easily miss crucial sources. Remember that in Political Science a lot of what is thought to be the most important contributions to our knowledge is available in books that are not accessible electronically. Several times in recent years I have seen essay bibliographies with entries of highly specialized journal articles, in some ways too specific for the topic at hand, but without reference to the most obvious and frequently-cited books. That is why you need to use more than one method for deciding what the most crucial sources are, and this means extracting yourself from the computer screen. Check the bibliographies and footnotes of books and articles that deal with your topic, even only a little. See whether there is a clustering of library call numbers in books that you discover, and then comb that area of the library shelves.

There is a huge literature contained in academic journals (such as the Canadian Journal of Political Science). Much of this material (not all) is indexed electronically, and here you need to figure out what kinds of subject headings and key words will get you close to useful sources. Magazines and newspapers can sometimes be useful, but you have to know (or learn) which among them is reliable, and what their slant is. For information about Canada, the Globe and Mail is more or less reliable, and for international coverage, the New York Times, the Christian Science Monitor, the Financial Times (London), and The Economist are useful English-language sources. All, however, have a slant, and you should be aware of where that slant comes most into play.

As you conduct your research, don't try to note down every fact or argument used by the writers in the area. Remember that you are focussing on a particular problem. Extract information and analysis, including illustrations or examples you think are particularly telling, that are relevant to your topic (along the way noting down where you got it). As you are reading, you may encounter passages that state an argument particularly well, others which provide unusually revealing detail. Note the exact location when you take it down, since you will be expected to give precise indications of where it came from at the writing stage. And when you come to write your essay, be prepared to do what is hardest for just about anyone to do -- throw some stuff out. Trying to inject into an essay every last detail garnered through the arduous research phase almost always leads to excessively long and tedious essays.

Knowing how much to read is never straightforward. Exposure to the literature dealing with any topic requires more than just a couple of books or a few articles. For large essays, half a dozen substantial and high-quality sources may suffice; for other essays you may have to compile a bibliography or a couple of dozen items and more.

## PLANNING

The single most widespread weakness in writing by students, and often displayed in early draft material from experienced scholars, is incoherent organization of evidence and argument. A vast amount of essay writing has no discernable plan, and no obvious path laid out through the empirical, logical, and theoretical material being taken up.

At some point before you begin writing, you should map out or outline your essay. This is sometimes best done after you have amassed your research material, though drawing up a tentative outline before you finish the gathering and reading stage sometimes makes sense of what further material you need to find. (Sometimes it is only at the writing stage that you are clear about gaps in your knowledge.)

At whatever stage you draw up an outline, treat it as a draft. Whether the sequence of arguments or blocks of information is effective will often only become clear as you write each section in turn. You may well get three-quarters of the way through your outline only to discover that it does not work well. A tentative outline will help you organize your research materials, and it will break the essay down into manageable chunks for writing – remember though that it is tentative. It may also help you figure out the most logical sequence for arguments and explanations and illustration.

When you are developing an outline, think about what order makes sense for the various sub-topics. Each section of the essay should lead logically to the next, and each major section should cluster together the large and small points that are closely related to one another. Think of a typical essay having four or five or six major “chunks,” and each of those chunks having a number of more specific points – most of those having their own paragraphs. Figuring out the order is not always easy. If your essay is asking why something happened, you might want to build up to the factor that you think is the most important – in other words, saving it to last. Or you may want to start with that, and then work through less important factors. If you are dealing with an issue over which there is a drastic disagreement, you might want to start with the argument that is less convincing and end with the argument you agree with.

Organizing comparative essays, dealing with more than one country or policy area or case study, can be especially challenging. You will often have to make a number of analytical points about more than one political system or institution. There is no ideal way of approaching this, but it is often easier for you and the reader to deal with the first country or institution, discussing the various aspects of it that are important for the comparison, and then move on to the second. As you go through your second case, go through your analysis in roughly the same order as you did the first. Then remind your reader of the similarities or contrasts along the way with such phrases as “as with . . .” or “in contrast to . . .” If this all seems awkward when you are writing, change the outline.

Remember that you cannot leave the outlining and writing of your essay until the last minute. Writing is inseparable from the organizing and analyzing that goes into an effective essay. It is often only in the course of writing that you discover weaknesses in your argument or anomalies in your presentation.

## **INTRODUCING YOUR ESSAY**

Treat the introduction to any term assignment very seriously. This is where you tell the reader what your essay is about and why the topic is worth examining. This is where you engage the reader's interest, and where you build that person's confidence in your ability to intelligently discuss the issues at hand. For all those reasons, the introduction shapes how the rest of your essay will be perceived. It might be the first section of the paper you draft, it definitely should be among the last parts you finalize.

At some point in the introduction, the central argument to be analyzed or the question to be posed by the essay ought to be put in as clear a form as you can muster. It needn't be right at the beginning. You may wish to set some sort of scene before focusing your reader's attention. You may, for example, wish to argue that some general topic area is of obvious importance, and only then zero in on the particular question that interests you. You may wish to relate a short anecdote that draws attention to your question or argument and makes it seem relevant. But at some point before too long you have to state the topic of the essay.

When you do state the point of the exercise, be clear and precise. Try to move beyond a statement as flat and uninformative as "this essay is about the political impact of globalization." Give a more focused rendition of either the question you want to ask or the answer you are exploring. What about a question like this: "have free trade and increased capital mobility stripped national governments like the Canadian of their room for manoeuvre?" Or provide an argument that such factors have substantially constrained governments, and that fiscal policy is a particularly important illustration, and then outline how the ensuing discussion will take up that claim.

When you are drafting your introduction, remember what many scholarly writers forget – you cannot assume that the topic you have chosen will be seen as important or relevant by anyone else. You have to help generate enthusiasm for what you are doing, and respect for your choice of topic, and do so in an engaging way that differentiates your work from the pile of term work being assessed by an instructor or TA.

In providing some indication of how you are going to proceed towards analysis and conclusion, try to avoid being too mechanistic ("this essay will first do x, and then y and z"). You can provide an implicit road map by stating that an understanding of your topic requires first an examination of contextual factors a and b, and then an analysis of variables x and y. There are subtler methods, though, of accomplishing the same goal of providing the reader with something of an advance look at the path through which you will be leading the reader.

At some point in your introduction, you may want to define key terms. You do not have to do this if you use widely understood terms in an uncontroversial way. However, if you use highly specialized terms (especially those that are outside the language regularly used by experts in the academic area covered by the course), or if you use terms that have alternative meanings, clarify your use of them either (briefly) in the text or in a footnote.

There is no formula for introducing an essay, or any other piece of work. Remember only that it has to flag the topic, pique curiosity in it, and inspire confidence in your ability to understand and explain its complexities.

## **WRITING**

Writing is difficult and time-consuming, even for the most experienced professionals. You should never assume that you will be able to prepare a decent product if you leave this stage to the last minute, or somehow imagine that a well-researched essay will write itself. If you spend twenty hours gathering and reading the raw material for a paper, you might well have to spend as many hours creating the prose that conveys information and analysis to your reader.

You ought to see the re-drafting of your essay as an inevitable stage of the creative process. Almost no one (including your instructor) can write analytical material that does her/him justice on the first go round. Some parts of an essay, and in particular the introduction, will likely need two or three drafts before approximating the quality which you are capable of producing. So do not ever find yourself saying “now all I have to do is write it up.” Such a statement implies that writing is a sort of technical process that simply transmits ideas you have already formulated and organized in your mind. In fact, writing usually reveals how much you have not yet sorted out, and therefore needs to be started long before the night before!

Drafting the various sections of the essay does not have to follow the order they will ultimately appear in, even if you stick to your original outline. You can sometimes overcome doubts or hesitations about writing by beginning in the middle, for example with a section you feel more confidence in than others.

After drafting an essay or a substantial portion of it, try to organize your schedule such that you can put it aside for a day or so. You would be surprised how many weaknesses you can discover after a modest delay. You can also try showing draft material to someone else you trust to be perceptive, and honest, since weaknesses, awkwardnesses, and typographical errors are almost always easier for someone else to detect. You can also try reading your essay aloud, or get someone else to do it: you will find that awkward writing or incomplete thinking is often much more obvious in speech than in silent reading.

When you are drafting the body of the essay, remember what I have already said, that each separate section must be coherently stated and organized; that each section should lead easily and logically to the next; and that all of the sections in their totality ought to constitute a convincing argument.

If you wish to build an argument to explain a particular phenomenon, keep in mind that you should **build it**, and not spill it out in a random manner or in a “stream of consciousness.” If you have three or four major points to make, reflect upon what order would be most powerful, most convincing, or most logical. A great deal of essay writing comes across as scattered and fragmented, without enough focus on the major ideas. This is partly a problem of organization, but also of not thinking enough about what links your arguments and observations, and what among them are most important. If you have a dozen or so points to make, see if you can cluster them into a fewer number of larger points: that way the reader is likely to have a clearer view of your argument.

Each large section of the essay should have a major statement of the point to be made in it. Within a section there are likely to be several paragraphs, each with an important and distinct claim or descriptive element. A paragraph is supposed to convey an idea, with appropriate elaboration or evidence or both. At the beginning of each paragraph, or close to it, there should be a statement of the idea contained in it – a topic sentence. Having stated that, you should **not** then go on to talk about quite different things in that single paragraph. And if at the end of writing you find that you have a very large number of very short paragraphs, you know that something is wrong.

As you proceed from one paragraph to another and from one major section to another, pay special attention to the transitions. Make it as easy as possible for the reader to know what you're doing and where you're going. Some sections lead effortlessly to the next, but some require special transition phrases or sentences that make the link between ideas explicit. Linkage between major sections is sometimes eased by reminding the reader (even in a phrase) of what the central question is.

In the concluding section of your essay, you may want to briefly extract the principal argument worked out in the body of the essay. It might also contain some material indicating the significance or the implications of what has been argued. Some conclusions go beyond the argument specifically addressed or supported in the body of the essay to a more speculative level. Essentially, what you should aim to do is to summarize what argument you've made or conclusion you've come to, and then to indicate what kinds of significance it may have.

## **STYLE**

You may have wonderfully innovative ideas, and a finely-honed analysis, but if you have no mastery of language either in writing or in speech, you will come off sounding unimpressive, or worse. There are a good many people who say that what counts is the content of an essay or a book or a speech, and not the way in which it is conveyed, but they are wrong. You simply cannot separate the medium from the message, and no reader will be able to (whatever they claim).

The overwhelming majority of students retain bad writing habits throughout their years of undergraduate education, and so do many established academic writers. Learning how to communicate better is a continuous process that should never end. Part of what has to be learned are the rules of grammar, and you might be surprised at how often we all make mistakes on that front. Even

experienced writers will occasionally be inconsistent in the use of past or present tenses, or will fail to retain parallelism in the structure of phrases or clauses, or will misplace adjectives or adverbs.

All essay writers would benefit from looking over the sections of a more detailed essay-writing guide that deal with common grammatical errors. Two of the best are – *Writer’s Choice: A Portable Guide for Canadian Writers*, by Margot Northey and Margaret Procter (Toronto: Prentice Hall Canada, 1998); and *Making Sense: A Student’s Guide to Research and Writing, Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. by Margot Northey and Lorne Tepperman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2007). It is brief, accessible, and focused on the kinds of problems that writers really do encounter. It also covers the kind of ground covered in this essay though of course in more detail.

There are grammar-checking devices in word-processing packages that can provide some help in cleaning up your writing. However, these are highly imperfect, and no substitute for learning how to write more correctly unaided. Spell-checkers are somewhat more reliable, but will still miss things. They will not include all of the technical terms or proper names you might use in a political science paper. They will not tell you if you have misspelled something but in a way that still makes for a real word. (For example, they will not tell you if you have used “there” instead of “their” or “two” for “to.”) So they should not be used as a substitute for proofreading.

A few words on punctuation are warranted, since there are many writers who are weak here but who otherwise have a reasonable grasp of grammatical rules. Most people **speak** with all of the pauses in the right places, but a good many of them can't translate straightforward verbal pauses into equally straight-forward commas. Many written sentences, for example, will contain parenthetical phrases, words, or clauses in the middle (such as the “for example” in this sentence), but will not have the two commas surrounding them to indicate its parenthetical status. A good deal of writing will not differentiate between minor pauses and the more substantial pauses signaled by colons and semi-colons.

Beyond the question of formal rules, academic writing often requires a degree of formality. You should avoid slang of course, and in general you should avoid contractions – “wasn’t,” “didn’t,” “aren’t,” for example. Most formal writing avoids using the personal pronoun “I” though there is no rigid rule around that (and some reject the norm altogether). The avoidance of the “first person singular” voice comes partly from the expectation that analysis is based on more than your personal opinion or experience. Some essay work has an autobiographical content, in which case you are very much explicitly in the picture. But most essays are about some phenomenon that you are expected to reflect upon with ideas and evidence and logic that are not just about you.

There is a risk of going too far in separating essay writing style from everyday speech. There is a marked tendency in the academic world (and lots of other places) to associate cleverness with verbal complexity. If you face a choice between a complex or multi-syllabled term and a simple word which conveys the same meaning, why not select the simpler word? If you write “utilize,” do you really want to say anything different from “use”? If a straightforward word will do the work of a more complex

phrase, why not go the simpler route? If an accessible term will say exactly the same as a Latin word, think hard about whether you are tempted toward the latter just to show off.

Be healthily skeptical, too, of academic jargon. Every discipline tends to develop a set of terms to convey ideas of particular interest to specialists. That is inevitable, and can serve to sharpen communication between experts and make it more efficient. Some jargon, however, is useless and pretentious. If faced with a choice between jargon and an ordinary English word which conveys **precisely** the same meaning, choose the latter. Use professional discourse when it conveys an idea efficiently, and only then. (If you think your instructor will be impressed by lots of jargon, by all means pander to his or her taste, but don't absorb any long term writing lessons from the exercise.)

(If you want a humorous but perceptive critique of academic prose norms, you should read an article called "Dancing With Professors: The Trouble With Academic Prose," by P.N. Limerick, in the New York Times Book Review (31 October 1993). I believe that most of my academic colleagues would agree with Limerick's view, but some would not.)

Another academic pattern you should try to avoid is the overuse of the "passive" voice. "The election was won by the Liberal Party" and "The Republic was written by Plato" are examples of that passive voice. "The Liberals won the election" and "Plato wrote The Republic" are examples of "active" voice. You might be surprised at how common the former pattern is, and how much it can make writing seem flat and disengaging.

There are lots of other stylistic "ticks" to avoid. Stay away from trendy words and phrases that become suddenly popular in the media (or the academy). A few years back, "hopefully" was suddenly everywhere, and apart from anything else almost invariably misused. More recently, "albeit" seems to have surged into common use, probably because a lot of people thought it sounded more sophisticated than "although" or other reasonable equivalents. Avoid clichés too – words and phrases that are so frequently used that they are entirely predictable and emptied of any interesting content.

Avoid wordiness. Everyone's writing has excess baggage, and most prose can be trimmed down in size, sometimes as much as 50 percent, without any loss of detail. Writers often waste space with vague phrases or sentences that delay getting to the point. For example, they will often use a curious "two step" in opening up a topic: a first sentence which gives the general topic area, a second stating the argument. If you wish to argue that "proportional representation makes single-party government unlikely," do not say "Proportional representation is one of the factors related to cabinet make-up." Be direct: state the argument right away and your topic is introduced automatically.

An enriched vocabulary is essential for efficient and effective writing, though again you should not fall into the trap of using unnecessarily obscure jargon. You should work at expanding your word range in part so that you can choose the right word to say precisely what you want to say, and in part so that you can avoid using the same words over and over again. Try using a thesaurus (available in print or on line)

to build your word range. You have to be sure you know what words mean, though, so you should also use a good dictionary that provides illustrations of word use.

Remember, too, that social scientists will often use terms in ways that are not fully captured by regular dictionaries. In some cases, the same term will mean different things to separate groups of political scientists (“social class” being a good example). You may think you’re conveying one idea to a reader, but you may in fact be conveying something quite different. Care and precision are important not only in the use of terms which are central to the discipline, but also in all language.

If a rich vocabulary is one way of making your writing more interesting, varying sentence length and structure is another. Use short sentences for emphasis or to make a particularly dramatic point, but avoid overuse of them. By all means use complex sentences, to ensure that an idea is sufficiently elaborated or qualified. Be wary, though, of cumbersome structures that do not flow effectively, or that have to be re-read to get the meaning.

## **BIAS**

When you are choosing words and phrases, keep in mind that language can all-too-easily contain bias and convey stereotype. Racist terminology, for example, was once routinely incorporated into the English language (including academic terminology), and many writers unwittingly still use language with discriminatory undertones. Less subtly, some writing conveys prejudicial stereotypes about particular cultural and ethnic groups, or treats the experience of Whites or Europeans as a “normal” or universal standard against which all others are measured.

When writing about race and ethnicity, and for that matter about other groups traditionally marginalized in social and political life, be aware of the preferences that groups develop for particular terms that describe themselves. A few decades ago, for example, “black” replaced words like “negro.” But in the United States, “African American” is now much more widespread, and virtually universal in formal writing of the last decade or so. In Britain, the term “black” was long used to denote people of both African and Asian ethnicities, but more and more is being used just for the former.

There are similar complexities in regard to sexual diversity. The word “homosexual” gradually came to be replaced by the terms “gay” and “lesbian,” in part because they were less clinical sounding. “Gay” has a male connotation for most people, so is usually not used to cover both sexes. The increased visibility of bisexuality and transgenderism has been evident in the increased complexity of the vocabulary in this area, though terms like sexual diversity and sexual minorities can help in writing inclusively.

Considerable attention has been devoted to the ways in which gender bias still dominates our language, and you should try to reduce or eliminate that bias. More and more writers now recognize that male terms like “man” and “he” should not be assumed universal – that is, covering women and men. Try to get into the habit of using gender-neutral language, for example by using “she or he” or “one” in the

place of “he,” and by using “humanity” or “people” instead of “man.” If some of the substitutes seem awkward, you can try restructuring the sentence. For example, “a student should normally submit his essay . . .” can be changed to the plural – “students should normally submit their essays . . .”

Occupational terms that assume the gender of incumbents should generally be avoided. The word “chairman” can easily be replaced by “chair,” “head,” “director,” and of course “chairperson.” Terms like “alderman,” “stewardess,” and “policeman” have simple replacements like “city councillor,” “flight attendant,” and “police officer.” Such changes have been fiercely resisted in the past, but most writers and editors now recognize that they are sensible, and that the vast majority can be effected with ease and grace.

## **SUPPORTING MATERIAL**

When you state a fact or an argument, you will often want to lend support to it by referring to the relevant literature. Occasionally, you will also want to quote directly from one of the sources you have encountered in your research. A particular author may have an especially unusual point to make, made in an unusually striking way – otherwise there may be no particular reason to quote. When you do insert a passage from someone else’s writing, be sure to use quotation marks, and to indicate where it is from (see below). If you want to leave out a portion of the author's words, place spaced periods (. . .) to so indicate; and if you want to insert a word to give the passage coherence, place your insert in square brackets. (Use direct quotes sparingly: remember that your essay is supposed to be **your** essay.) If the quotation is reasonably short (less than four lines, for example), you can surround it with quotation marks and integrate it into the body of your essay. If longer, it can be set apart, indented, and single spaced (without the need for quotation marks).

Your essay may be embellished with statistical material, in which case you may wish to use tables or figures. These should generally be incorporated into the body of the essay, close to the first reference to them, although some writers group tables at the end of their papers. Tables should be carefully labeled such that they are clearly understandable on their own, and the sources of the data should be clearly indicated at the bottom of the table or figure. If you include a table or figure in your essay, you should highlight the trends revealed by it in the prose of your essay, rather than simply assuming that the table or figure speaks entirely for itself. If you incorporate statistical measures into the presentation of data, be sure, too, that you understand how to interpret them.

You may have information to present that you feel is important for your readers to know but not absolutely central to your argument or topic. You may know of a controversy or debate swirling around a particular point you are making, but think that a discussion of it will be too disruptive for the main body of your essay. One possibility is to insert a footnote, in which you take up the debate or the tangential point in a few sentences. Students often assume that footnotes are only for indicating the source of ideas or quotes, forgetting that they can be used to make substantive points. Another possibility is to add on a short appendix, though you should remember that any upper word or page limits on your essay will include that kind of material.

## **ACKNOWLEDGING SOURCES**

You **must** acknowledge the source of the ideas, data, and words which you use – apart from information widely available and understood. If you rely on facts which any intelligent social scientist would be expected to know, you do not need to indicate the precise source. But if you derived an unusual fact or a distinctive assertion from a particular author, you must tell your reader where it came from, partly to credit the original author and partly to allow your reader to judge the validity of your claims. Not doing that entails theft.

This form of theft which we call plagiarism can vary from the borrowing of an idea without credit to the purchasing of an essay written by someone else to the downloading of all or part of an assignment from the internet. It violates the very idea of a university, and is treated by everyone within the university as a serious academic offense. The penalties can be severe and the process unpleasant. When instructors encounter a case of plagiarism, they are **required** to inform the department, which then passes the file onto the Faculty office. If you do not know what constitutes plagiarism, it is your responsibility to find out. The Political Science Department has a handout on it, and you can easily obtain it from the department's web site and from most instructors.

The internet provides the means to gather vast amounts of information for essays, and the same rules apply as for published written material. If you use information that is not commonly known, or an interpretation derived from a particular author whose work is on the internet, you should indicate the source. If you use web site material that is also available in hard copy, you should indicate the internet source if it was there that you actually derived the information you used. If you are tempted to use electronically-accessible material without citing it, or to pass off whole essays available from web sites, you should realize that there are lots of effective ways of tracking down sources of essay writing that are thought suspicious.

By all means use the contributions of other writers and of other students to help build your own argument. But take the time and the care to document the origins of those ideas, and then work at making something of your own in the way you construct your essay.

## **FOOTNOTES, ENDNOTES, AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

There is no single system for indicating the source of ideas or quotes: what counts most is that you adopt a consistent approach that includes all of the essential information. There are two general systems in widespread use within Political Science. One is what is often called the MLA system (Modern Languages Association). This places references to a relevant author or authors in brackets at the end of a sentence, including the last name of the author and the year of publication (e.g. Rayside 2008; Wiseman, 2007), and then groups all the published sources together in a bibliography at the end, each entry listing the full name of the author, the title of the book or articles, etc..

Many social scientists use a referencing system based on footnotes (at the bottom of pages) or endnotes (at the end of a paper or article or chapter). The footnote/endnote number typically appears at the end of a sentence or quote. The actual note then provides the full details of where you got an idea or a quote, or the details on other relevant published sources. There are various formats available, and most readers will not care much which options you choose as long as you are consistent. What counts, as in the bibliography you use for the MLA style, is that you include the information most important for finding your sources or weighing their value – the name of the author, the title of the work, its location (if not a free standing book), and the place and date of publication.

Here is one approach to formatting publications:

**for a book:** Full name of author, Book Title and Sub-title (City of publication: Publisher, date).

**for a journal article:** Full name of author, "Title of Article," Name of Journal volume or issue number (year of publication): page numbers.

**for an article in a book:** Name of article's author, "Title of Article," in Title of Book, edited by name of editor (City of publication: Publisher, date), page numbers.

**for an internet source:** Name of author (if available), "Title of Article," in Title of web page or whole web site, web site address, date on internet source or date the site was checked.

**for a newspaper or magazine article:** Full name of author, "Title of Article," Name of Newspaper or Magazine, date & year, page numbers

Most essays end with a bibliography listing the sources used in your research. Entries should be listed alphabetically, and like footnotes they should be single-spaced (with double spacing between entries). Generally speaking, bibliographic entries begin with the last name of the author, though in other respects they can follow the same format as notes. (Here too there are various styles, but what counts most is that the information you provide is complete, and that the format you use is consistent.)

Whatever reference style you use, footnotes or endnotes can perform additional functions. They may provide additional material which is not absolutely essential to the argument of the essay and which would therefore clutter things up, and they may signal debates or disagreements in the literature you are dealing with.

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

A word on presentation. Double-spacing with one-inch margins is fairly standard, allowing some room for comments and corrections by the marker. Use an 11 or 12 point font, and a readable style. Don't fuss too much with stylish extras and fancy title pages, since they can be more distracting than attractive. And don't both with special covers or binding – they are a nuisance for readers and markers. A paper clip or a staple is just fine.

An essay should not be submitted for more than one course unless the explicit permission of the instructors has been obtained. It may sometimes be possible to write term work for two courses, and

thereby create a more substantial piece of work, but to try it without formal approval constitutes a serious offense equivalent to plagiarism.

There are various writing workshops on campus, generally associated with the colleges. These are staffed by highly skilled professionals who know a great deal about writing and research. They are also heavily booked at the ends of term, so you should try to take advantage of them early on in the preparation of term work. Keep in mind that these workshops are designed for students in the full range of academic disciplines, so they cannot be expected to assess the analytical sophistication of a political science essay in the same way that a specialist would. They also cannot be expected to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse (in other words, a "D" into an "A").

A final reminder that you would benefit from the purchase and reading of either :

Margot Northey and Margaret Procter, *Writer's Choice: A Portable Guide for Canadian Writers* (Toronto: Prentice Hall Canada, 1998).

Margot Northey and Lorne Tepperman, *Making Sense: A Student's Guide to Research and Writing, Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2007)