

Essay Writing – Some Common Mistakes

This document offers some quick pointers to some of the most common problems that I find that I have to correct time and again when I mark English Literature essays.

When marking essays, tutors do not usually give a set number of points for spelling, punctuation, grammar etc. You will not automatically get a 2:1 if you write a poor argument but with absolute grammatical correctness, nor will you automatically fail to get a top mark if you do not use the semicolon correctly in an otherwise bold discussion. However, as a part of the general tone of an essay, it is important to pay attention to issues of style. After all, your attention to the detail of writing says a lot about your abilities as a critic. For example:

- How far would you expect your reader to trust in your close analysis of the grammar and syntax of a poem, if you cannot use the apostrophe or semicolon correctly?
- Will your marker be able to pay close attention to your elaborate argument, if he or she is continually having to correct trivial points of detail?

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The Golden Rule: Time Management

One thing I am often asked is how it is possible to edit an essay so it fits within word limits, and how to check it for easily correctible errors. The answer is simple: time.

If you write an essay without leaving time for a proof read, do not be surprised if it is returned with many corrections, and suggestions of how the structure should have been improved.

You should leave a gap of several days between completing the first draft, checking the essay, and producing the final version. This means that you will approach the essay rather as your marker will, as a naive reader who has not seen it before. If you do this you will find that mistakes leap out at you, because you are not unconsciously correcting errors having only just written them. Any parts where the essay does not flow so easily will be obvious. Finally, if you are over the word limit, re-reading a while after writing should refocus your mind on what your core argument was supposed to be, and show you any material that is extraneous or less relevant to the key thread of your discussion.

Of course, building a gap between drafting, proofing and finishing requires you to be organised, and not to be writing the essay the night before it is due in.

Issues in Introductions

One of the most common flaws of introductory paragraphs is that they seem hesitant, circling around the topic without getting directly to the analysis.

Delaying Tactics

One of the most obvious “delaying tactics” is the use of grandiose phrases, which seem a little journalistic or appropriate for a book review but less so for a critical essay:

✘ Charlotte Brontë was one of the greatest writers in the Western canon.

Try also to avoid using such comments in a conclusion as well.

Another form of expression which seems hesitant is a sentence which offers descriptive or historical detail, but which is of little relevance to the question:

✘ Jean Rhys was 76 when her masterpiece *Wide Sargasso Sea* was first published.

Of course, that is not to say that historical detail does not matter – it often matters a great deal, as in:

✓ When considering the representation of God in *Paradise Lost*, it is helpful to remember that Milton was writing the poem following the Restoration of the monarchy, which may have affected his perception of the moral righteousness of autocratic rulers, whether this be Charles II or God himself.

Narrative

One key thing to avoid is retelling the story of the poem, novel or play that you are examining:

✘ *Jane Eyre* tells the story of a poor young orphan, who grows to become a successful governess, and who eventually marries the wealthy Mr. Rochester.

You can assume that your markers are familiar with the basic plot, form and characters in the text you are examining. What is more interesting is the style in which these are written.

Commentary

Another temptation in an introduction is to commentate. Commentary means explicitly restating the terms of the question, or talking about what you intend to do in response to it. Although naturally an introduction may set out the scope for your argument, perhaps sketching in the main points you want to cover, there are worse and better ways of doing this so as to give your ideas a sense of ambition and range, which show that your ideas extend beyond the scope of the question:

✘ This question asks whether *Jane Eyre* is a feminist novel, and in this essay I will show that it is not.

This seems much less confident than stating:

✓ Critics such as Elaine Showalter have presented Charlotte Brontë as an early feminist. However, the evidence of the novel does not support this conclusion.

In the second sentence, you show that you are not simply thinking about the question, but about the topic in general and the critical issues that underpin it.

Sometimes you may want to commentate in order to acknowledge the limitations in your argument, thereby justifying the focus you will take in your essay:

✓ Although one might show John Donne’s use of dramatic voice in his *Holy Sonnets*, it is in his secular poetry that Donne’s voice as a performer comes

through most strikingly, and so this essay focuses only on this branch of his poetry.

This is fine, although obviously doing it too much will draw attention to what is absent from your essay, rather than what is present.

Issues of General Tone

First Person

Linked to commentary, excessive use of the first person can give the impression that you are not really confident in your argument.

✘ I feel that *Jane Eyre* is not really a feminist novel.

Try instead to use a passive voice, or drop references to “feelings”:

✔ *Jane Eyre* cannot be said to be a feminist novel.

The latter makes it seem like this is more than just your personal view, but rather is a matter of fact. A judge in court does not say “I think you are guilty.”

Although critical essays tend to be presented in a passive voice, it is not always wrong to use the first person. In some circumstances, such as when you are pitching your own opinion against that of received wisdom, it might be possible to use it without seeming hesitant:

✔ Whilst critics have perceived Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* as his masterpiece, I would contest this assumption, arguing instead that *The Iceman Cometh* is aesthetically superior.

Use of Evidence

One of the qualities of a good essay is that it smoothly integrates evidence with argument.

At the simplest level, this involves introducing quotations in a well-structured way, which makes clear why the evidence is in line with the argument.

✘ Joe Keller is a character who eventually realises that he was wrong to stress the importance of family over society: “They were all my sons.”

✔ Joe Keller eventually realises that he was wrong to stress the importance of family over society, when he acknowledges at the end of the play that the fighter pilots “were all my sons.”

The second sentence is superior. Firstly, it is explicitly clear why the quotation validates the statement about Joe Keller. Secondly, it also conveys the additional information that the quotation was taken from a passage towards the end of the play. This is clearly a significant detail if you are arguing about the way Keller comes to a gradual realisation about his own moral flaws over the course of the drama.

Grammar

The Apostrophe

In possessive pronouns, the apostrophe always precedes the “s” when the possessor is single, and follows the “s” when there are lots of possessors:

- ✓ Lots of dogs with one bone: “The dogs’ bone”
- ✓ Lots of dogs with lots of bones: “The dogs’ bones”
- ✓ One dog with one bone: “The dog’s bone”
- ✓ One dog with lots of bones: “The dog’s bones”

Use of Qualifiers

Do not use qualifiers such as “Whereas” or “But” to start a new sentence which directly qualifies the preceding one.

- ✗ Ibsen presented a positive view of independent women. Whereas women in O’Neill’s plays tend to be drunks, whores or dope fiends.
- ✓ Whereas women in O’Neill’s plays tend to be drunks, whores or dope fiends, Ibsen presented a positive view of independent women.

In general, “however” should not appear mid-sentence

- ✗ Ibsen presented a positive view of independent women however women in O’Neill’s plays tend to be drunks, whores or dope fiends.

“However” can start a new sentence that qualifies the previous one, so long as it is followed by a comma:

- ✓ Ibsen presented a positive view of independent women. However, women in O’Neill’s plays tend to be drunks, whores or dope fiends.

The only time “however” can appear in the middle of a sentence is if the word is being used in the sense of “which ever way” or “no matter what”:

- ✓ I am never going to be able to complete this essay before the deadline however late I work into the night.

Semicolon

The semicolon is a specialised piece of syntax, which is used in two situations.

Firstly, the semicolon can be used instead of a comma to separate items in a list, usually where each clause in the list is quite long:

- ✓ Examples of pastoral poetry include: Wordsworth’s “Lines Written in Early Spring,” which celebrates the involvement of God in nature; Keat’s “Ode to Autumn,” which invokes a classic poetic form to celebrate the lavishness of the harvest; and Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” which lauds the ghostly and ephemeral power of the weather to affect mood.

Secondly, the semicolon can punctuate two (or more) clauses that are closely related:

- ✓ At the start of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman seems to be living the American Dream; by the end of the play, the flaws in that dream will have been tragically exposed.

The semicolon here separates two clauses that could just as correctly be separated by a conjunction (such as “and”) or by a full stop. We could have written the sentence above as:

- ✓ At the start of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman seems to be living the American Dream. By the end of the play, the flaws in that dream will have been tragically exposed.
- ✓ At the start of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman seems to be living the American Dream, but by the end of the play, the flaws in that dream will have been tragically exposed.

The decision to use the semicolon is stylistic. It shows that you want your reader to relate the first clause to the second in an easy flow, which might be disrupted by a full stop or conjunction. However, as with all subtle stylistic devices, the effect of the semicolon fades with overuse. There is nothing clever about using the semicolon if you use it to excess, and there is nothing wrong or simplistic in the use of full stops – so if in doubt, use the latter.

Because semicolons are clauses that could equally well be separated by full stops, the clause either side of the semi colon must be complete i.e. it should include a verb:

- ✗ *Death of a Salesman* is a play about Willy Loman who seems to be living the American Dream; a defeated dream.

People

People in life – or characters in literature – are not objects, so do not treat them as such. Characters should be referred to as “who,” not “that”:

- ✗ Hedda Gabler is the woman that seems most shocking in the eponymous play.
- ✓ Hedda Gabler is the woman who seems most shocking in the eponymous play.

Presentation

Italicisation

Use italics for:

- ✓ Titles of novels (e.g. *Jane Eyre*)
- ✓ Titles of essay collections (e.g. *Realism and the Novel*)
- ✓ Titles of collections of poems (e.g. *Lyrical Ballads*)
- ✓ Titles of plays, whether these are published within a larger collection of plays, or as separate plays (e.g. *A Doll's House*)

Do not use italics for:

- ✗ Quotations
- ✗ Titles of individual poems or chapters from books

Quotations

Generally, you should not use ellipses if you are taking material from across more than one paragraph. Ellipses can be used to make a text seem to say anything you want it to say, and to draw together a range of material as if it forms one long quotation in the text can seem disingenuous.

Printed Layout

Make sure your essay is formatted correctly:

- ✓ Double line spacing
- ✓ Wide margins
- ✓ Paragraphs clearly separate either by a clear line break, or by a tab indent for the first line of a new paragraph