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978-0-521-72979-6 - A Student's Writing Guide: How to Plan and Write
Successful Essays
Gordon Taylor
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A Student's Writing Guide

Are you struggling to meet your coursework deadlines? Finding it hard to get to grips with your essay topics? Does your writing sometimes lack structure and style? Would you like to improve your grades? This text covers everything a student needs to know about writing essays and papers in the humanities and social sciences. Starting from the common difficulties students face, it gives practical examples of all the stages necessary to produce a good piece of academic work:

- interpreting assignment topics
- drawing on your own experience and background
- reading analytically and taking efficient notes
- developing your argument through introductions, middles and conclusions
- evaluating and using online resources
- understanding the conventions of academic culture
- honing your ideas into clear, vigorous English.

This book will provide you with all the tools and insights you need to write confident, convincing essays and coursework papers.

GORDON TAYLOR is Honorary Research Associate at Monash University; before his retirement he was Associate Professor and Director of the Language and Learning Unit in the Faculty of Arts there. He was a pioneer in the development of content- and discipline-specific writing programmes for students in higher education. His many publications include *The Student's Writing Guide for the Arts and Social Sciences* (1989).

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A Student's Writing Guide: How to Plan and Write Successful Essays by Gordon Taylor succeeds and replaces the above work.

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For Kasonde, Susan *and* Jeremy

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Preface

When the first edition of this book was published I believed that it could and should have a fairly limited life. This belief was founded on the idea that, such is the closeness of language, thought and subject matter, the future of such books would be based on the disciplines of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences and that, consequently, the best people to write such a text were those who knew the rhetoric of their own disciplines more intimately than a generalist ever could. The teaching of a discipline, I have long held, should include as an inalienable component the teaching of how to write in that discipline, just as the Roman scholar-statesman Cicero had inveighed in his *De Oratore* against 'that absurd, needless and deplorable conception, that one set of persons should teach us to think, and another teach us to speak'.

To some extent this has come to pass – but only to some extent. There are now student manuals on how to write in some disciplines, particularly history, English literature, psychology, philosophy and sociology. What I did not foresee is the extent to which many of the old disciplinary boundaries have begun to blur, and the extent to which new inter-disciplinary 'studies' subjects have come to characterise the offerings of arts and social science faculties. Much in the climate of thought (and rhetoric) has changed. As a result, there still seems to be a good case for a general book such as this one, in which I have taken the opportunity to engage with these new developments.

Moreover, many other things have moved on. The kinds of essay topic now being set are often rather different from those that used to be the staple in many courses; the kinds of tasks have changed – particularly the opportunity now being given to undergraduate and course-work graduate students to devise and write research papers; and, of course, there are many new problems as well

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as advantages posed by the ubiquitous use of the computer/word-processor and the internet.

Even so, there would probably have been no second edition had it not been for a few terriers at my heels. Andrew Winnard of Cambridge University Press was a terrier with longer staying power than is usually found, ably abetted by colleagues at Monash University, Tim Moore and David Garrioch, whose encouragement and continuing assistance have been crucial. In getting up to speed with the more recent kinds of essay topics and many other things, I would have languished without the immense assistance of Steve Price, Matthew Piscioneri, Andrew Johnson and Jim Hlavac. To those many academics whose essay topics I have used for illustrative purposes I wish here to record my indebtedness. There are many books on the history of Jews, Muslims and Christians in mediaeval Spain (see chapter 3), but it was Constant Mews who pointed me to and lent me a more suitable text for my purpose, Maurice Glick on *Convivencia*. To Keith Allan, Marko Pavlyshyn and the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University I owe a great debt for smoothing my path. Finally, Kate Brett, commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press, has been my constant guide for the life of this project.

Much of the emphasis in this book (as it was in the first edition) is on what writers (both you the student and the writers of the sources you use) DO with their language. Your attention is drawn to this throughout the text by the use of SMALL CAPITALS.

Preface to the original 1989 edition of *The Student's Writing Guide for the Arts and Social Sciences*

This book has grown out of a writing course I have taught for some years to students of the arts and social sciences. In both I have tried to emphasise the close connections between writing in these disciplines and grappling with the problems of knowledge and understanding they present. Writing is not merely a skill we employ to record our knowledge, but the very moment at which we confront what learning and understanding are all about. So, while the reader will surely find plenty of guidance on the practical issues that arise in writing an

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academic essay, a search in these pages for simplified techniques that side-step the very taxing work of coming to terms with knowledge and method in these disciplines will be fruitless. My project has been to clear paths, not to indicate short cuts.

It has been my experience that many students' writing problems arise from uncertainty about what it is they are trying to say and what it is they have to do. So far as is possible in a general work of this kind, I have attempted to establish, in a variety of representative disciplines, some of the connections between issues of content and the forms of language in which the content can be realised. I am conscious that there are arts and social science disciplines which have not received extended treatment in the examples. But I trust that in concentrating attention on some of the most important things that we *do* with language in academic studies I have been able to direct readers to the kind of thing to look for in the particular disciplines they are studying.

The book is divided into three parts. I suggest the chapters of Parts I and II be read through at least once in the order presented. In this way the student will get a general idea of how to approach the writing of an academic essay. Not everybody approaches writing and learning in quite the same fashion, so it is important that the suggestions in Parts I and II be interpreted in a way that works best for the individual reader. The chapters of Part III contain in many instances extensions of themes introduced earlier, but they can also be read as more or less self-contained introductions to particular problems in the use of language. For the most part, grammatical and other details of language use are dealt with not in the manner of the conventional guides to usage but as they arise in those contexts of meaning we concentrate on as we write. It will therefore be necessary to make good use of the index. Part III is not a comprehensive guide to the language of academic discourse. I have chosen to treat only those features of language which students often question me about, those which in my estimation cause most trouble, and those which (spelling apart) tutors most regularly draw attention to in their marking of essays.

The book has been some time in the gestation. To John Clanchy, Brigid Ballard and Elaine Barry I owe many thanks for their

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encouragement and for commenting on drafts which they have now probably forgotten. I. W. Mabbett helped me greatly to clarify my thinking on some of the material in chapter 3, and the readers of the Cambridge University Press have made this a better book than it would otherwise have been. My students have contributed much: not only have they let me use their work, they have pushed me to understand certain things about writing I would never have gleaned elsewhere. But it is on the person who, as the psalmist says, can 'always keep judgement' and who has believed in this book when I didn't myself that I have depended most – my wife Angela.

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