**RESEARCH ESSAY**

**Structure, Argumentation, Originality and Etiquette**

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| **AIMS**:   * To help students structure larger academic works, in this case, a 4000-5000 word piece (the largest most students will have done). * To help students carry and hold an argument over the whole piece. * To dispel pressures around and notions of originality. * To outline for students the etiquette of writing – the rules and requests around essay formatting, referencing, titles and paper presentation. |

**LECTURE**

Begin by outlining the structure of the lecture. If appropriate, have a discussion about organising larger pieces of research. Make clear that the aim of this lecture is to address student concerns about writing a longer paper than previously done in their academic career (4000-5000 words).

***Please note that this lecture relies on clear examples to illustrate the nuances of answering specific types of questions set by your course. You therefore will need to edit the slideshow fairly extensively to be relevant to your course.***

# SECTION ONE: Structure and Weighting [10-15 minutes]

**Slides 4-11 should be edited.**

Structure and weighting are immensely important, especially when it comes to turning an average essay into a very good one. Most essay or research questions require you to do several things; however, this does not mean that these tasks carry equal weight. When you are, for example, asked, to evaluate the merit of a certain explanation for the outbreak of a war, you have to provide your reader with a summary of that explanation, and then set out to evaluate it against other potential explanations. This means you have two tasks at hand: to **summarise** and to **evaluate**.

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| Q: Which of the two (summary and evaluation) will be the bigger and more difficult task?  A: The evaluation. This means that only a small portion of the word count should be spent on summary – that is historical background. |

Students who do really well know how much time and space to spend on the different components of their essays. We are now going to look through a few model questions and think about how we might structure our answers together.

* + As we are studying conflicts here, and as you probably all know Tolkien’s classic, I have chosen the conflict between Mordor and Gondor as an example [these examples are very close to the five topics given to students for their research questions. The use of a ‘make believe’ example is useful as it can highlight how students should exam their questions and cases without actually giving potential cases they could use].

**Three different types of questions**:

Different questions entail slightly different tasks, which mean there is no ideal structure that can apply to every single question. The questions for your research essays generally fall into one of three broad categories:

* + Causes/Explanations
  + Actors/Roles
  + Evaluations

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| ***Class Activity***: Essay structures  Go through slides 5-10 with the students. For each question slide (slides 5, 7, 9) ask, “What does this type of question require in order to be answered?” Then give students 2 minutes to jot down their own outlines for the first question on the slides, elicit some ideas, and go through the model outline on the following slide (slides 6, 8, 10) with them.   * Make clear that these models are not set in stone – some things can be adapted and changed around. For example, in the first outline, the sections for “Other factors” and “The resource crunch in Mordor” can be swapped around. * Elicit an approximate percentage of the word count for each section from the students, e.g. in slide 8, “Define Fellowship” should not really take up more than 5% of the assignment, while the theory part also should not take up the majority of it. * Make clear that when it comes to evaluative questions (slides 9 & 10), students must first of all clearly define their criteria for what constitutes success/failure or good/bad, before they start evaluating. |

# SECTION TWO: Sources and Argumentation [10 minutes]

## Argumentation:

Many students also struggle with basic argumentation, and thus it is important to lay down some basic groundwork for those whose argumentation is poor.

* Make it clear to students that they have a **limited word count**, thus they should not have more than two main arguments.
* Cover the basics of argumentation: **sound versus valid arguments** [see Slides 14-15]. Make it clear that a good essay is both logically sound and valid. Link these points back to the use of sources, as different literature sources should assist students with both the quality of their reasoning, and the factual accuracy of their essay. [For this, you can refer back to Lecture Two, “Building An Argument” and Lecture Three, “Finding Your Academic Voice”].
* Make it clear that there is no one way to argue, and use examples to illustrate different ways a student could argue. Also make it clear that the style of argument should be appropriate in answering the type of research question [See Slides 16 and 18 for examples].
* [See Slide 17]. Point out that given the limited word count, students can choose to focus on a small number of key factors. They should explicitly lay out in their introduction which aspects of the debate they are focusing on, i.e. it is acceptable that, because of the constraints of writing, to state that you are only going to focus on a limited number of factors or parts of the debate.
* [See Slide 18]. Students need to be aware of the scope of their answer, e.g. they may be able to successfully argue that the South African TRC did not establish truth, but this does not mean they can claim it as an entire failure or claim that other aspects (e.g. reconciliation) also failed. They must keep within the confounds of their question.

# SECTION THREE: Using Sources and the Issue of Originality [5-10 minutes]

**Sources:**

Students often struggle to use their sources effectively and efficiently. To assist them with this, it is important to indicate how sources should be used in regards to the students arguments.

* Discuss why sources are used. They are used for two broad purposes: firstly, to provide ‘facts’, e.g. statistical data; and secondly (and more importantly) to provide support to your argument(s). Sources can do this by either providing support for your argumentation, *or* by refuting or going against your argument, in which case, you need to show how these counter-arguments are poorly presented or unconvincing. In academic writing, in order to show how your arguments are convincing, you often need to show how other author’s arguments are unconvincing.

Suggest ways to read the sources. Getting familiar with a wide literature may be intimidating. Gives helpful tips for note-taking and reading strategically. You may wish to consult the “Book Review” lecture, which includes sections on note-taking and reading.

## Originality:

Many students spend a lot of time agonizing over writing a research paper that has not been done before – i.e. they think that their work must be original. This is obviously not what we look for in a research paper. Make the following very clear to the students:

* There is very little (if anything) that is original in this sense
* The challenge of the assignment is to position yourself in an existing literature on a subject of interest and through thorough research, exhibit understanding and provide some “new analysis” on the subject.

The question often then becomes – what is the point of the research paper? At this point – it is important to show why a research paper can still be valuable and contribute to the literature on a specific topic.

Ask students how they think this might be done – discuss the ideas they come up with and try and guide the discussion to show that a paper that discusses ‘old’ ideas can still be valuable. Some potential examples that may come up are:

* Criticising theories or ideas in a new way (by drawing on different authors)
* Relating ideas or concepts in new ways
* Testing theories with new observations or cases
* Compare authors and their arguments previously ‘un-compared’.

# SECTION FOUR: The Etiquette of Writing [5-10 minutes]

## Table of contents:

Included in the slideshow is a tutorial about how to use the “Insert Automatic Table of Contents” in Microsoft Word. This is covered in more detail in the PDF titled “CET+MS+Advanced+Word+2007+Training+Manual+v1.0” on pages 5-8.

Using this function allows students to automatically update their page numbers in their essay. Edit the example on slide 30 to reflect a table of contents that relates to an essay topic set in your course.

## The Etiquette of Writing:

Students often have practical concerns around how they should format and organise their work. Markers also have a number of requests or standards they wish to impose in order to ease the grading process. This section aims to inform students how to format and organise their work.

Firstly, hand out the ‘rules and requests checklist’ to students [adapt to your course]. Perhaps take the time to state the importance of a standardised format for the work (e.g. it makes it much clearer for marker as to your organisation and structure of your writing).

Explain a **table of contents** for academic essays:

* Put an example of a table of contents up [see slide 30]. The example here is for a paper of 6000 words; this gives an indication of the number of sub-headings that might be used.
* The sub-headings must be included in the main body of your essay (as must page numbers).
* The overall use of a table of contents for the grader is to see your structure. We can see from this table of contents that the essay is structured logically – it is organised correctly. We can also see the weighting given to each section through the page numbers; this gives an indication of whether the student has focused on analysis or description. We can see from this table of contents that most of the pages are assigned to answering the question and analysing.

A note on **referencing**:

* State the required referencing style(s) acceptable for the course; perhaps state why certain styles are not accepted (e.g. different referencing styles give emphasis to certain pieces of information; the date is often an important factor in humanities pieces, so it’s important to use a style that includes the date).
* If time allows, have a brief discussion of why referencing is important:
  + Issue of academic honesty.
  + Referencing places the writer within a field of study; it indicates where they have drawn their understanding from and their engagement in academic debates – ‘stand on the shoulder of giants’ (Google Scholar).

# Conclusion

In closing tell students to look at the resources added to Vula that supplement this lecture:

* Table of Contents guide → “MS Word 2007 Training Manual”: sections “Using Styles” and “Table of Contents”
* UCT Humanities Referencing Guide
* Research Writing and Style Guide Adaptation
* Useful websites.
* Research Essay Checklist (edit this if needed)

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