

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING AN ESSAY IN THE CLASSICS DEPARTMENT

**by
the Classics Department,
University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand**

TABLE OF CONTENT:

- Introduction
- What is a good Classics essay?
- Starting
 - Start early
 - Choose carefully
 - Read smartly
 - primary sources (literary sources and archaeological/art historical evidence)
 - secondary sources (on general topics, literary texts, and archaeological/art historical evidence)
 - Take notes carefully
- Writing
 - Good introductions
 - Citing primary sources in the body of your essay
 - Discussing secondary sources and introducing your opinion
 - Good conclusions
 - Appendix: examples of footnotes and bibliographic entries
- A useful tool: Paper Diagnostic Test

Introduction

The aim of this guide is to

- in *handbooks* that focus on a particular topic; for example, books that offer texts in the original language or in translation on topics like Roman economy or Greek mythology.
- in *collections* that gather together inscriptions, papyri, etc. These collections are highly specialized and generally organized by geographic area.

In the process of reading, your ancient literary sources, take notes. These notes should be organised around the following questions:

- *when?*: The period in which something was written has enormous relevance to our understanding of a particular phenomenon. In some cases we do not have literary material produced in the period of our interest. For example, our knowledge of early Roman history derives mostly from Livy, an author who wrote in the Augustan period, that is, centuries after the events you may be concerned with. This implies that early Romans did not write history as we mean nowadays. Something like this may be relevant to your discussion and showing awareness of this problem will have a positive effect on your reader.

- *Who?* and *for whom?*: The identity or status of the person who wrote a text affects what we can learn about the ancient world. In the same way, the intended audience of a text or an inscription affects our capabilities to understand what people knew. For example, Augustus wrote the *Res Gestae*, a biographical inscription produced in various copies that were placed in public spaces of various cities of the Empire. This means that you have a situation in which the first Roman emperor talks about his deeds and life; but you also have a number of people belonging to various social classes in disparate places reading a text while going about their business every day.

- *what?* and *how?*: In answering the questions posed, you may have to compare various primary sources and argue their importance for your argument. Accordingly, it is a good idea to take note of what a text represents and how it does so. For example, if you are asked to discuss the figure of the emperor Augustus, you may use a statue or a coin or a literary text or an inscription. A representation of the emperor on a coin might communicate something different from a statue placed in a Roman

properly recorded at the time of excavation are more informative. So, consider the context of the work or works you are discussing.

- *Who?* and *by whom?*: Who produced the artefacts or art works under discussion? Were the producers also the users? A good deal of Greek black figure pottery was imported by Etruscans into Italy and used as grave goods in Etruscan tombs. Thus, a vessel produced in Athens in the 6th century BC but found in an Etruscan tomb in Italy reveals certain information about the Greeks (e.g., relating to pottery production and overseas trade), but also about the Etruscans (e.g. burial practices and levels of wealth and prosperity).

- *What?* and *how?*: When you are asked to discuss or interpret works of art, the question often wants you to discuss what is represented and how. The posture, gesture, and clothing of figures in a scene reveal a good deal of information to the viewer, and consideration of these aspects helps to understand what messages the creator of a particular work might have been trying to convey. The composition of the scene, that is, the way its elements (animate and inanimate) are represented and arranged in space, also reveals important information not just about the artist and his (or rarely her) skill, but about potential messages. Often scholars do not agree on the particular meaning of a work of art, and so there are many modern interpretations of it. For example, the Panathenaic frieze on the Parthenon in Athens, when analysed according to the criteria above, can be variously interpreted. See more on this in the paragraph “secondary sources”.

- *Where?* and *who?*: Consider the ancient context of the work or works you are discussing. Where was a piece of sculpture located and who was intended to see it? The famous Prima Porta Augustus statue has a breastplate decorated with figures that convey numerous messages. The statue we have, however, came from a private villa belonging to Augustus' wife, Livia. The content and meaning of the figures on the breastplate is so significant that it has led scholars to conclude that it must be one of several copies.

understand the direction of scholarship and the questions that modern scholars have tried to answer.

When reading secondary sources, it is a good idea to do the following:

- **Select and summarise**: In the process of reading take note of key points and write down the evidence that the author used to prove his or her point. Some essay questions will ask you to consider and criticise the opinions of modern scholars, for example, “Was the end of the Roman republic a “revolution”? In cases like this, you need to go to the modern author who expressed the opinion that you have to discuss and study closely his/her argument. **Where a piece of evidence is crucial to an argument, it is a good idea to read the primary evidence that a modern author used and think about whether you agree or not with what the author says.**

- **Criticise**: Try to understand why the author uses a certain angle and whether he/she has a specific political agenda. A scholar who writes in the early

Secondary sources (general considerations and secondary sources on general topics and literary texts):

S E L E C T

Secondary sources present a scholar's interpretation and conclusions about what a set of literary texts, a particular archaeological site, or historical evidence tells us about the ancient world. Reading secondary sources helps you

historical evidence you must proceed in the same manner as for essay questions based on literary sources. In other words, you must choose the evidence you will use to make an argument, study and evaluate it, and then make conclusions based on your analysis.

WARNING: Among secondary sources are studies published on the world wide web. There is no policy that forbids you from

parts of the argument/essay needs more (or less) research until they start writing it.

Schematic essay plan

Introduction:

- presentation of the argument

Body of the essay:

- presentation of scholarly views
- arguing your position in relation or in opposition to the above
- use of supporting evidence

Conclusions:

- brief summary of your position

is clearly introduced by way of title and author; Furthermore, because it is longer than a couple of words, the citation is indented. Afterwards, the citation is discussed by implication. The reference to the primary source is clearly indicated in footnote; and, since it comes from a handbook, the author of the essay indicates the author(s) of the handbook as well.

When that fails, he sends a messenger to Hades to “appeal to Hades with gentle words.”¹ The way in which Zeus proceeds in appealing Hades suggests that...

¹ *Hymn to Demeter*, vv. 233-234 in *The Hymn to Demeter*, trans. By H. Foley (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989).

-- In this case, the citation is introduced directly into a phrase and marked by quotation marks. The next phrase points to what is important about the evidence. Again the reference to the primary source (the numbers refer to the lines of the poem) is put in footnote. Again the author who edited and published the primary text is clearly indicated.

In Hesiod’s *Theogony* much emphasis is placed on the crime committed by Prometheus and the punishment that both Prometheus and human beings have to suffer. Plato’s *Protagoras* offers a different perspective...

-- In this case, the author relies on two ancient sources and makes a clear distinction between two different and yet similar accounts. Note how the author is avoiding paraphrasing, that is, *re-telling* the story or the sequence of events, and how he/she highlights what is important to his/her overall argument.

of a scholar and puts them between quotation marks.
Moreover, the author uses the

relief scenes. In both public and private relief the Romans appear as military victors – always occupying the upper left and always remaining upright or mounted in an organised battle line. By contrast, I showed that non-Romans were normally represented as the enemy and relegated to the lower corners in a variety of stooping, kneeling, falling or prostrate postures. I further argued that the Romans used composition to portray themselves as moral victors by creating scenes showing Roman clemency, mercy, and even *pietas* to submissive non-Romans.

Appendix : Examples of footnotes and bibliographic entries.

Footnotes

-

A Useful Tool

Paper Diagnostic Test

After you have written the first draft and you are about to start your final draft, edit your paper trying to answer the following questions. If you can answer them with clarity, you will have a pretty good paper. If not, you will know where you need to work on.

INTRODUCTION:

What is the thesis of this paper?

Is there a map to the paper's main points? Outline these points.

Does the introduction suggest the significance of the thesis statement?

BODY:

Go through each body paragraph. Write the responses on a separate sheet.

Identify the central point of each paragraph.

Locate the evidence (i.e. quotations)

Are they correctly formatted?

Is there a discussion of the quotations?

Does the discussion address the paper's thesis?

How does the paragraph end?

Does the last sentence conclude the paragraph's central point?

Is there a transition to the next paragraph?

Write a brief outline of the body paragraphs of the paper. Do they prove the paper's thesis?

CONCLUSIONS:

Does your final paragraph map the main points of your paper?

Do you offer an answer to the question posed at the beginning?

If not, what is your suggestion on how to handle the problem?

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Are your sources arranged alphabetically?

Are primary and secondary sources integrated (i.e. presented as a single list)?

Have you followed