

# **Week 9: Essay Writing**

## **Introduction**

Many students find essay writing challenging. The aim of this chapter is to divide this process into 'bite-size' stages, which will enable you to achieve a clear and persuasive academic writing style. To make your meaning clear you need to work out exactly what you are going to say about a topic and communicate this in a confident and logical manner. All students can improve with practice and attention to detail.

### **Seminar Exercise**

What do you think are the differences between essay writing at 'A' level and as an undergraduate?

What makes a good essay? Write down your ideas.

## **Things to do before you start writing**

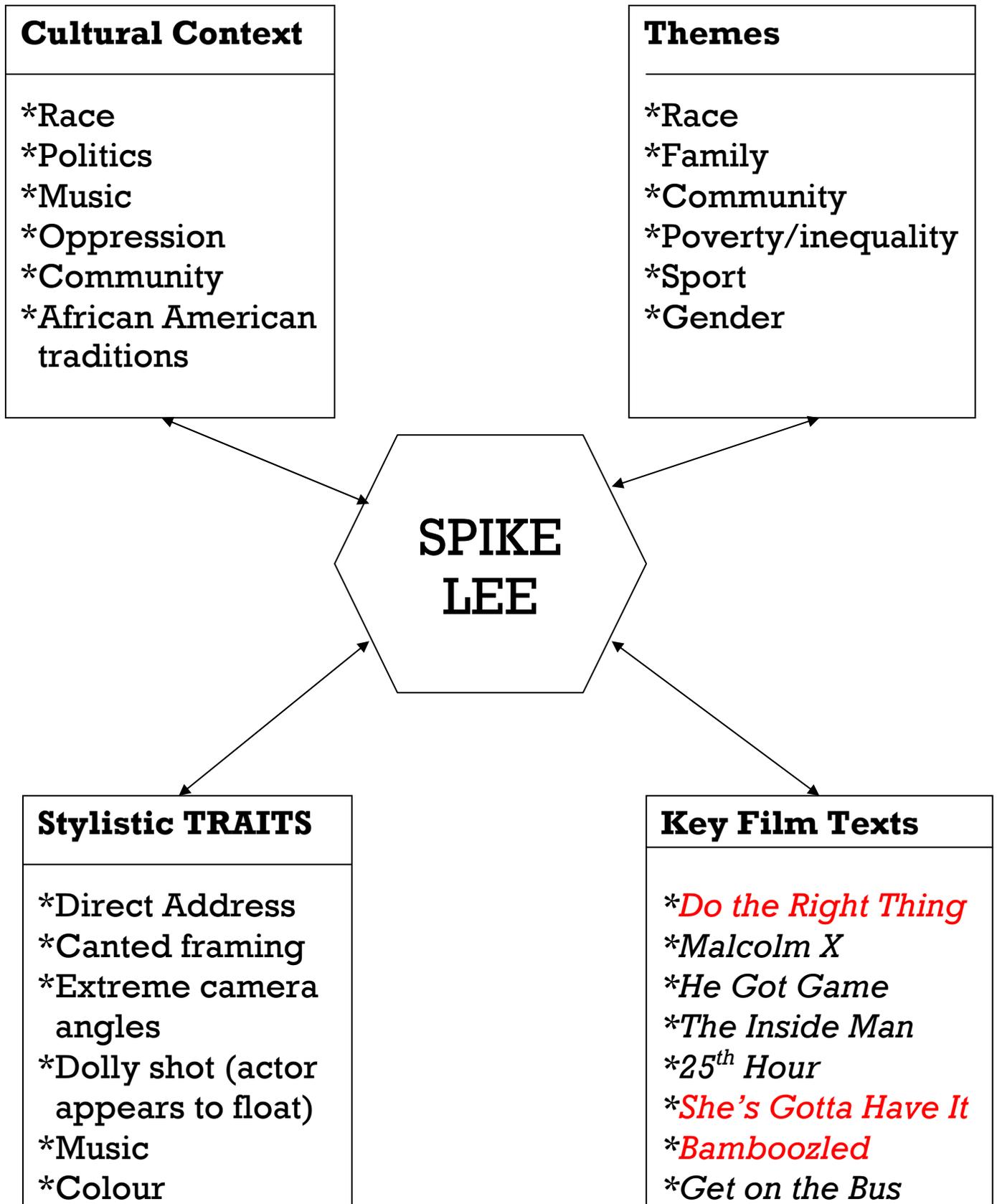
- Read all the essay questions carefully before you select one. Take your time this is a very important stage.
- Remember, to achieve a good mark you must be able to address all parts of the question.
- Underline or **highlight** key words in the question, (this will ensure that you read carefully and do not miss out vital information).
- Note how long your essay should be.

## **How do you start to form your answer?**

Mindmaps are a good way of developing and structuring your ideas. These can take many forms (spider diagram, flow chart, grid, etc.). We have included a spider diagram for the following question:

'Present an analysis of your favourite director, referring to at least three films. Make sure you consider recurring themes, stylistic traits and cultural context.'

The purpose of the spider diagram, or other forms of mindmaps, is to help you process and organise your initial ideas. Remember that this is simply a starting point. Once you have researched your topic in greater detail you will be able to focus on key areas, as it would be impossible to include so much material in one essay.



## **Seminar Exercise**

Produce a spider diagram/mind map in preparation for your essay. You must choose a director (not Spike Lee), but remember this is only a preliminary exercise as you will need to carry out research in order to do this properly.

## **Research**

To write a good essay you need to read. You need to read books and articles; internet sources alone are insufficient (unless you are using electronic academic sources). You need to allow plenty of time to do this. Make sure you note fully the sources you intend to use.

Have the essay title in front of you when you make notes as you need to keep your focus on the essay title. As you are reading, keep the following questions in mind:

How will I use this information?

Is this information important to my argument?

## **Organisation and Structure**

An essay needs to be structured. Your essay should take your reader along a carefully planned route. Your route must include all your main points and yet maintain an overall sense of direction. This involves two elements; organizing the points you want to make into groups and giving each of these groups a paragraph. The paragraphs then need to be arranged into a meaningful sequence which takes the reader to your conclusion.

The first thing to do is make a plan. This is crucial, as this will help you develop a coherent argument. (An argument is a series of points presented in a logical order, with links from one point to the next). You need to prioritise the main points of your argument and discard information that is not relevant to the question. **Good researchers often have to leave material out as there is simply too much to include.** You need to re-work and revise the order of main

points until you are sure that you have a logical and effective arrangement in order to begin writing.

Essays require an introductory paragraph, a series of linked paragraphs for the main body of the essay, and a concluding paragraph. These elements combine to form the scaffolding that firmly holds the shape of your essay.

Students up to and including 'A' level standard are often told that an 'introduction' should say what you are going to write about, you then do it in the main body of the essay, and then say what you have done in the 'conclusion'. In essence this is true, but it can be formulaic; tedious to do and read.

**Introduction** (1<sup>st</sup> paragraph):

You need to work out your argument/discussion before you write this first paragraph. Therefore introductions frequently are written last. Introductions can often be inadequate and often contain irrelevances such as regurgitating/paraphrasing the question.

Begin with a firmly stated idea of what you intend to argue followed by a brief explanation of your method to present this. The introductory paragraph maybe a good place to define key terms used in your essay.

Aim for an interesting first sentence to catch your readers' attention. Avoid the dull; 'In this essay I am going to do this, then this, then this ...' which reads like a shopping list.

One example of a good way to write an introduction to the question:

'Discuss masculinity in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*'

would be:

'This essay will concentrate on the roles of Robin Hood, Friar Tuck and the Sheriff of Nottingham in order to access masculinity in Kevin Reynolds's film. This discussion is divided into three parts each of which focuses upon a different facet of masculinity. The male hero in classical Hollywood cinema will be the starting point, followed by the masculine body as spectacle which leads to the final point of masculinity in crisis. These theoretical positions need to be briefly outlined, before being fully explored below, in order that a meaningful discussion may be undertaken.

### **The Main Body:**

In the paragraphs that make up the main section you need to expand the themes/points identified in the introduction. Work logically and build your argument point by point. Each point needs to be explained, developed and supported in a paragraph of its own.

To do this you need to develop your use of **link** words and **signposting**. Link words help your essay to flow and to carry the meaning forward from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph.

- They can suggest a change of direction: 'But, However, Conversely, Although Yet, Subsequently'.
- They can indicate that you are going to add something similar to what has gone before: 'Furthermore, Moreover, Additionally, In addition, Also, As well as'.
- **They can ....** Conversely: 'So, Therefore, Overall' show that you are going to conclude an argument and punctuate its significance.

Signposting phrases are useful reminders to the reader from time to time of the argument's direction. Phrases such as: 'It seems that if this is the case...', 'Having discussed ... it is necessary to look at...', 'As well as..., ...needs to be considered.', 'It is now useful to deal with the issue of...', 'The next important use of...', 'In point of fact...'. **There seems to have been some confusion – I see Signposting as a bad thing and I meant 'In this essay I am going to' ' Now I will do this' etc... what you have discussed seems to be lovely ways of students pulling ideas together and strengthening arguments – I don't see this as signposting – can we find another term for this and then include a section on not signposting – have a chat with me if confused (Ruth)**

### **Conclusion:**

In the concluding paragraph you need to give a direct answer to the essay question. There should be a sense of having reached the end. Ask yourself, 'If this paragraph occurred at the bottom of a page would you turn the page expecting more to follow? If the answer is 'yes' then your conclusion needs to be firmer.

Avoid a simple summarising; this is likely to be repetitive and reductive; similar to the 'shopping list' in introductions. It is unlikely to do justice to your essay. Be assertive. Show how your main points lead to your conclusion(s).

Remember: Do not raise new or unrelated issues in this last paragraph.

Signposting here may include: 'It can be seen from the above that...', 'It has been established that...', 'The earlier points raised lead to the conclusion that...', 'To conclude, throughout this essay it has become apparent that...'

## **Paragraphs**

You need to present your ideas clearly and will need to use paragraphs correctly. Paragraphs are groups of sentences on the same theme.

### **Successful Paragraphs**

Successful essays require clearly structured paragraphs

- Each paragraph needs to be centred on a particular issue linked to the question. It should have at least 8-10 lines to establish and develop an idea.
- Each paragraph needs to serve a purpose. Make sure the subject of the paragraph is clear.
- Each paragraph needs to have a connection to what has gone before and what is to follow. Avoid a series of unconnected points.
- You need phrases and words that link points to develop the logical progress to a coherent argument that directly answers the question.
- Is this paragraph relevant to the title? Does this paragraph progress my argument? What is this paragraph adding to my discussion?

## **Tone, Style and Voice**

In any writing it is important to have a 'sense of reader/audience'. Who should you assume is the reader when you write an essay? Although your tutor reads your essay, he or she is not your 'readership'. The usual advice is to write for an intelligent person who has an interest in your topic and would like to know more. Try

to avoid unnecessary information that is not relevant to the question, for example in-depth biographical details.

It is *very* important to write in sentences. If you are unsure if you have written a sentence ask yourself 'Does it have a subject and a verb?' ('it' is the subject and 'does have' the verb – **can we cut the info in the parenthesis?**). If you find this is not obvious to you, you will need to get some help with grammar. Otherwise you will find it difficult to develop your own style to express yourself and you will lose marks.

It takes time to find a writing 'voice'. In academic writing you should present yourself as a calm detached observer; unbiased, pointing out some arguments that are relevant to the question ('for heavens sake!' avoid emotive expression and exclamation marks). This is one of the main reasons that starting your essay can be difficult; it is the trying to work out where you are 'coming from'.

The 1<sup>st</sup> person question: In academic writing it is traditionally considered inappropriate to use the 1<sup>st</sup> person, 'I/We'. It is more acceptable to use the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, 'He/She/It'. This is straightforward when referring to other people's work, but it is not so easy when giving your view. How is this done?

Give your opinions indirectly using the passive voice. For example: 'I think that...' can become, 'It could be thought that...'. Above all avoid 'I feel...'. Academic writing is not about your feelings; it is concerned with reflective, balanced argument based on evidence.

## **Quotations and Sources**

Use a good range of sources and comment on them. Use more than one source for a whole section of your essay. Quotations must be introduced, contextualised and commented upon. **We have changed your heading for the quotes – are you ok with this?**

**Poor use of quotation:** *Dead Man* is a character-driven narrative, in this film, 'Plot is stripped away in Jarmusch's films, with events emerging from distinctive personality traits of the characters and the nature of their interactions'. (Nelmes, 2003, p.147)

**Good use of quotation:** *Dead Man* is a character-driven narrative; Nelmes argues that, 'Plot is stripped away in Jarmusch's films, with events emerging from distinctive

personality traits of the characters and the nature of their interactions'. (2003, p.147) This can be seen when..... etc.

Do not use too many quotes. We want to know your opinions and ideas. Remember, an essay is not a collage of academic citations! Also, it is not necessary to quote every time that you take a point from a critical source. You can put the writer's views in your own words and still cite the source. Only use quotations when the critic says something that is impressively written or memorable.

An unnecessary quote: **Jarmusch's films are characterised by 'a really interesting use of narrative techniques' (Allen, 2002, p.302). (we've made the example the same - we made this up!)**

A good use of quotation would be:

In her discussion of episodic structure in film, Nelmes argues that:

this character-centred approach to film-making also permeates the structure of Jarmusch's films. Instead of a coherent narrative strain, the films proceed thematically through their own internal thematic logic. (2003, p. 147).

Always present quotations correctly. Look closely at the above quotations. In the case of quotations that are shorter than 3 lines in length, use quotation marks and place within body of the paragraph. Quotations that are 3 lines or more should be indented. Also leave a line before and after the quotation and omit quotation marks here.

## **Common Mistakes**

### **Spell Checker**

It is important to remember that the spell checker will not pick up all mistakes.

- 'typos', e.g. 'form' where you intended to write 'from'
- The spell checker does not know the grammatical sense of the word, for example; 'there' instead of 'their'.

### **Common Spelling mistakes:**

- definate - should be 'definite' (think of 'finite')
- independant - should be 'independent'
- loose (as in loose a cricket match) - should be 'lose a cricket match'

- who's and whose
- principal – the main figure, the head of a school
- principle – a fundamental truth, a moral principle.
- Stationery – writing paper
- Stationary – not moving, immobile
- Practice – the noun, 'Doctor's practice'
- Practise – the verb, 'students need to practise essay writing'.
- Affect = a verb; Effect = a noun – e.g. 'the special effects affect the way that the film was received'
- don't forget the 'i' before 'e' except after 'c' rule – as in 'believe' but receive)

### **Apostrophes:**

This is an area where many students have difficulty and make mistakes. Incorrect use can either change the meaning of a sentence or make it meaningless.

The apostrophe is used to denote possession. If there is one 'owner' the apostrophe is placed before the 's',

**Hitchcock's** films, **Britain's** film industry (There is one Hitchcock and one Britain).

If there is more than one 'owner' the apostrophe is placed after the 's',

The **actor's** relationship with the director - only one actor  
 The **actors'** relationship with the director - more than one actor

Remember the following:

it's = it is

its = its (possessive)

It's a good film; its main qualities can be seen in the use of cinematography.

From this example you can see that the apostrophe is used to show that a letter has been omitted (it's), therefore it is important to remember this when writing 'don't (do not), 'shouldn't' (should not) and so on. It therefore follows that when writing 1950s, 1960s, 1990s then is **no** apostrophe. **Nothing** has been omitted in these dates.

### **Tips and Advice**

- **Keep to the word limit. Most institutions will penalise you if your essay is 10% over or under the limit.**

- Always include a word count at the end of your essay
- Your essay should not just express an opinion or feelings. It must advance an argument.
- Aim for depth not breadth. In other words, don't just produce a list of points; it is better to have fewer points and fully develop them.
- The basis of all good writing is clarity. Clarity arises from clear thought and simplicity of style. Aim to be clear, precise and concise.
- Use short sentences and straightforward syntax; your prose will sound less clumsy.
- Remember; use italics for all film and book titles
- Assume that the reader has not read and viewed what you have but, that they are interested in the topic offered in the title.
- Avoid personalised statements, for example, 'I feel' 'I believe' 'In my view'.
- Avoid 'we' 'you', use instead 'the audience', 'the reader'.
- Avoid clichés like the plague.
- Avoid overusing brackets (however useful they appear) as they are (for the most part) unnecessary.
- Pay attention to grammar and spelling at all times. Many marks are lost due to poor writing.
- Before handing the work in always proof read your work. Reading aloud is a good way to find errors.

## **Final Check List before submission**

Ensure essay title is written in full at the top of first page.

Use 12pt font, double-line spacing and 3cm margins left and right for ease of marking.

Have you numbered the pages of your essay?

Slowly scroll through essay to check overall appearance, (paragraph breaks, quotation marks, references etc...)

Is the printing legible or do you need to reprint?

Have you included both a Bibliography and a separate Filmography

Do you know where and when the essay is to be handed in? Do not be late!!!

### **Seminar Exercise**

Read through the following 3 excerpts taken from introductions from student essays. Comment on the work, and give it a grade. The typical University grading system works as follows:

First Class:	70+
Upper Second (2:1):	60-69
Lower Second (2:2):	50-59
Third:	40-49
Fail:	0-39

The question the students were given was:

Choose any one film from the Set Viewings on this unit and analyse it using any two theories from the weekly programme. You should compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of the two theories and consider how film studies have developed them to reach its current point.

### Student Excerpt 1

The usefulness of genre and auteur theories can be identified within many types of film, however, for the purposes of this essay, the aim is focussed towards an examination of how these two theories in their contrasting ideas can in fact complement each other. To illustrate this I will consider an analysis of Stanley Kubrick's, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). But first I will record some aspects of genre and auteur theory that are relevant here.

### Student Excerpt 2

In various ways, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is a classic film for investigation within the context of both Genre and Auteur Theory, essentially it presents an interesting and complex blending between the dichotomy of both approaches to film. Indeed, an Auteur approach would be quick to label it as a *Kubrick* film in the *Kubrick* tradition. However, a genre theorist wouldn't delay in classifying *2001* as a film belonging to a science fiction tradition, What needs discussion is how we can come to recognize, comprehend and possibly accept this duality and also what each approach to the film can offer us in our understanding of it as a piece of cinema.

### Student Excerpt 3

There are many theories that have been applied to films when analysing them. It is important to create theories when talking about a certain subject as it helps to create an understanding and sometimes meaning. Two of these theories are the genre theory and the auteur theory. Both of these became particularly apparent in the early 1950's to the 1960's and there are a few specific films made around that time that really established them. There were also certain directors about at the time that contributed towards establishing these theories.

Reading through this – we think that the differences are quite subtle – can you just rework the essays making it much clearer which is a 3<sup>rd/fail</sup>, first and average ok?

We have deleted the boxes as we felt it was too basic – however, a range of appropriate essay writing vocabulary might be useful – can you have a look at what the ASK unit has and we have also put something in your pigeon hole– this could go in a section with the subheading: vocabulary for essay writing