

# **A Guide for Writing Essays**

Prepared by

**The Department of English**

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and

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## Introduction

### Writing about Reading

As an undergraduate student, you learn that different subjects or disciplines - even those that might seem closely related - have very different expectations when it comes to coursework and examinations. This *Guide* identifies the main requirements for writing an essay in a course offered by the English Department at the University of Auckland. Be cautious about applying the suggestions made here to your written work for any other subject - or about applying another department's criteria to an English essay.

The main difference between an English essay and most other kinds of essay is that you are not asked to find out about and present a particular body of information; instead, you are asked to write about your reading of a 'text': a play, a novel, a short story, a poem, a film, a programme or commercial for television. The word 'reading' is used here in a broad sense, to refer to the process of making sense of any of these types of text; whatever text you are studying, you are encouraged to pay close, thoughtful attention to it. So if you are asked to write about a text, you don't present information about it, or summarise it; nor do you go off and read what some authority has written about it and reproduce that. Instead, the most essential research you can do for an English essay is to read - and to re-read and think about - the work you've been asked to discuss. The raw material for your essay is therefore not what others say about the text. The primary material for an English essay is your reading of the text.

As well as this difference in raw material, the assignments you write for the English Department will often require a different structure, tone, and style of presentation from essays you might submit in other departments, or those you might have written at secondary school. This *Guide* will outline the main characteristics expected of an undergraduate essay in this department, and will suggest how your written work can conform to these.

Because the study of written and visual texts does not involve reproducing certain predefined correct answers, students cannot simply write their essays according to model arguments or structures. Rather, the best work emerges only as the result of good habits of reading and writing, including thorough planning, revision and editing. For this reason, the *Guide* aims to follow the process of writing an essay step-by-step, from reading the question to handing in the completed text. Alternatively, you may just dip into certain courses to seek help with specific areas of your writing process.

## What Makes A Good Essay?

Markers in the English Department are keen to see some of the following in undergraduate essays:

- analysis of *how the text works*, rather than a paraphrase or translation into your own words of *what it says*: Sections 1, 2.1, and the Appendix.
- a clear argument, reading, or line of discussion, consistently maintained throughout the essay: Section 2.
- textual support or evidence for every major point your essay makes - often in the form of quotations, or precise references to the text: Sections 4 and 5.
- relevance to the question: every point made in the essay should link up, implicitly or explicitly, with your response to the question: Section 2.3.
- a coherent structure, arising from sound essay writing habits: Section 2.
- accuracy of grammar and presentation, and appropriateness of style: Sections 3, 5, and 6.

Finally, the very best essays in the English Department often contain one or more of the following ingredients:

- freshness of approach
- elegant, lucid writing
- a sense of enthusiasm and engagement.

These qualities cannot be achieved by following any handbook or guide, but only by extensive practice in both reading and writing of all kinds.

## English Department Grade Descriptors

The Faculty of Arts has developed the following grade descriptors for use when assessing essays. The descriptors may help you, when preparing coursework for assessment, in thinking about your own writing as you prepare your essays.

A+, A, A-

Written or presented work of high to exceptionally high quality showing good to excellent understanding of text and concepts; well-formulated argument supported by textual evidence and secondary reading where relevant; treatment of material ranges from comprehensive to exceptionally critically mature, marked by a high level of creative ability and originality; excellent communication, writing and presentation skills.

B+, B, B-

Well-written or presented work that shows a sound grasp of text and concepts, fulfilling requirements with competence; argument clearly developed and based on convincing evidence; some creative ability and critical engagement; communication, writing and presentation skills ranging from competent to assured.

C+, C, C-

Satisfactory to barely satisfactory written or presented work showing a knowledge of text and concepts ranging from moderately competent to superficial. Argument developed and supported by some evidence and references; limited creative ability and critical thinking; adequate communication, writing and presentation skills.

D+, D

Written or presented work showing a poor understanding of text and concepts; inadequate argument with little to no supporting evidence, marked by failure to interpret the material; weak communication, writing and presentation skills.

D-

Written or presented work showing a highly unsatisfactory understanding of text and concepts. Complete lack of argument. Unacceptable level of communication, writing and presentation skills.

# 1. Choosing and Analysing the Question

## 1.1 Which Topic?

Choose your topic as early as possible. You need time to think, as well as early access to relevant texts in the Library.

Feel free to answer on topics or texts that have not yet been covered in class. While avoiding questions that seem to you baffling, pick a topic that engages you in some way. It may even challenge you. A challenging question may motivate you more than one that seems easy, although questions that ‘seem’ easy usually are not. Never underestimate any question.

If you feel the question is ambiguous, or you are not entirely sure where its emphases lie, be sure to clarify the question with your tutor as soon as possible.

## 1.2 Question Analysis

A thorough analysis of the terms of the question is the best way to get started on your research. Look up and define key words - in specialised dictionaries, if possible - and clarify the relationships between various parts of the topic.

Below are sample analyses of three different types of topic commonly encountered by students.

### *(i) A Close Reading Assignment*

The close analysis or close reading - of a poem, or an extract from a novel, story, play, film or programme - is a common exercise required of undergraduate students studying English.

The instruction given for a close analysis assignment may be very brief: “Write a critical examination of any one of the following poems (texts attached)”;

or it may be longer and more detailed:

Conduct a close critical analysis of one of the following passages, showing how the language and techniques operate. You might consider, where appropriate: word choice, imagery and other figurative language, sentence structure, tone, point of view, setting, characterisation. However, you should feel free to range widely in your analysis. Finally but briefly, you should consider how the passage relates to the rest of the novel from which it is taken.

1. Words and phrases such as 'close', 'critical', and 'analysis', suggest that your response should be both detailed and precise; you must concentrate almost exclusively on the text you are given to analyse. Any space devoted to background information or general knowledge about the writer or the text will be wasted. The example above does ask you to "consider how the passage relates to the rest of the novel from which it is taken," but it instructs you to do so only briefly. References to parts of the text other than the given passage should take up very little of your essay, and should only be included if they relate specifically to a point you want to make about this passage.

2. It is clear from the question that the main object of a close analysis assignment is to show that you understand "how the language and techniques operate". Above all, avoid turning your discussion into a paraphrase or translation of the poem or passage into your own words. You will not get marks for this; you will only get credit for analysis of the text. Paraphrase involves telling the reader what the text says; analysis or close reading means telling the reader how the text works. Throughout your discussion describe how the various techniques and strategies impact upon the reader, and from these detailed comments construct an overall reading of the extract or poem.

3. The question specifically tells you certain activities you 'should' perform (for example, relating the passage briefly to the rest of the novel): these are obligatory. It also makes some suggestions about features of the language that you 'might' look for, where appropriate: these are only suggestions; they may or may not be applicable to your particular passage. Use this list of language and literary techniques as a way of getting into the analysis, but do not adhere to it too rigidly; rather, the question tells you that you should feel free to range widely in your analysis. You are able, then, to look for features of the passage other than those listed in the question; it does not mean to 'range widely' into the author's life story, the other bits of the novel, or literary history in general.

4. It is usually unwise to let the phrasing of the question govern the shape of your essay (or limit your reading of the text itself). To examine each linguistic or technical feature of the text in the order in which the question lists them - word choice, imagery, sentence structure, tone, etc - would most likely produce an extremely artificial and fragmented discussion, lacking the all-important links between different literary strategies and the effects they produce.

Some students, on the other hand, simply follow the text through, from beginning to end, dealing with the first main part of the poem or passage in the first paragraph of their essay, and then going on to the next, and so on. While this kind of structure might be useful in order to convey to the reader your experience of the *process* of reading the text - as something that unfolds over time - the danger is that the approach will produce a fragmented discussion. The logic of the text and the logic of your essay are two different things. You are the writer of your essay and you need to make structural decisions of your own about your essay.

The most successful kind of essay arises from your own decisions about what you want to say: that is, your reading of the text suggests the main points for your essay, and the order in which these should come.

Finally, try not to worry if you find this kind of assignment challenging - many students do. This guide will give you some suggestions about getting started, but the best way to learn is through practice. Remember that lectures will provide a frame for your own work, and your tutorials are designed specifically to teach the skills you need, and to practise them, which is one reason why tutorial attendance is vital.

(ii) *A Topic Essay Requiring Discussion of More Than One Text*

Other assignment questions ask you to discuss a certain topic in relation to a given text - or in relation to more than one text. For example:

Discuss the role of the malcontent protagonist in any two or more plays from the course.

1. The question asks you to 'discuss' - probably the most commonly used instruction in English Department assignment topics, and the broadest. It does not mean that your essay can run on in a chatty way, without order or particular relevance to the question. On the contrary, the word 'discuss' means that your marker expects you to develop your own ideas from the text(s) in relation to the topic, and to construct from this material a coherent and convincing argument, a position that you establish, demonstrate and maintain. To 'discuss' may involve a number of the following processes:

- analysis (of the terms of the question, and of the text)
- description (of technical features of the text, of the effects produced by the text)
- comparison and contrast (between characters, between texts, or between parts of the text)
- assessment and evaluation (of the text's literary strategies, of the impact of certain characters, of critics, of the terms of the question, etc.)
- illustration (of particular arguments, by means of examples from the text).

Because establishing and maintaining an argument is your primary concern, it is usually helpful, at some point in the writing process, to compose a *thesis statement*: that is, a brief (one or two sentence) summary of your argument, outlining the position you want to take on the topic, and your reasons for doing so. See Section 2.1 for more discussion of thesis statements and how to use them.

2. Topic (ii) above will require you to research, and to discuss in your essay the significance of the phrase 'malcontent protagonist.' Be careful here: most dictionaries will simply tell you that a 'malcontent' is somebody who is unhappy or disaffected. A far more specific meaning

for the term is needed, however, when discussing the malcontent protagonist in the plays from the course (i.e. those of Shakespeare and his contemporaries). Ensure that you have a full understanding of any technical terms, or any words that have precise meanings relevant to the particular course you are studying.

General definitions from ordinary dictionaries can be highly misleading. As a student at The University of Auckland, you have electronic access to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, through your Library. Use it often. Go to the University's home page, then to Library in Quick Links, then find Databases and Articles and click. Select O in the alphabetical list of letters, then scroll down until you can see Oxford English Dictionary and click. When the *OED* opens, click 'connect.' Once connected you can search for words, check their etymology, see how the word has been active through the years, and much more.

A student might, for example, define and then expand the definition of the terms supplied by the question:

They [the malcontents] are outcasts and commentators, determined to destroy what has made them 'malcontented' (para. 1).

It is a feature of the malcontent that he feels himself victimised by society (para. 2).

By placing themselves outside the natural order, the malcontents are in prime positions to act as social commentators (para. 3).

The word 'malcontent' immediately implies a figure whose actions stem from some complaint (para. 4).

The way in which the malcontent works his revenge is always in keeping with his character or position (para. 7).

By examining the terms of the question in relation to the chosen texts, the essay generates most of the content - as well as a basic structure.

3. Note also that the question above asks the writer not to discuss the 'malcontent protagonists' themselves - as though they were real people - but rather to discuss their 'role' in the plays. Analysis of the word 'role' suggests that the marker will be looking for detailed consideration of what part these figures play in the action, how they function on stage, and what effect their position has on the drama as a whole.

4. Finally, the instruction to discuss the topic in relation to 'two or more plays from the course' means that the essay structure will have to accommodate cross-references between two different texts, combined into a coherent argument. The most common mistake that students make, when asked to discuss more than one text in a single essay, is to produce two (or more) mini-essays, one on each text, within a single assignment. That approach creates a very fragmented discussion which lacks its own structural logic.. Remind yourself that you as a writer must make careful decisions about the structure of your own text, your essay.

Usually it is better to discuss both texts (or as many as are required) all the way through your essay. One way of doing so involves tracing the connections you wish to make point-by-point: every time you make a specific point about one text in relation to the topic, you also make a related point about the other which enables you to establish a large number of very detailed and precise links, or differences, between your texts; and equally, to relate each text very specifically to your argument.

A second approach is to focus at length on one text, and then at length on another, in a way that makes explicit their relationship to your argument, and the connections between them. You can then return to the first text for a while, and subsequently go back to the second, and so on. The 'block' method has the advantage of allowing you to write a more coherent and in-depth exposition of each text in turn.

In most cases, it is best to combine the point-by-point and block methods in the different parts of your essay.

### (iii) *Discussion of a Quotation*

Often, when setting a topic question, tutors and lecturers will give you a quotation and ask you to discuss it in relation to a given text or texts:

1. *Faces in the Water* is merely a documentary exposé of the evils of psychiatric institutions in New Zealand. How valid is this claim?

2. Chekhov's plays centre on histrionic people who posture, seek grand romance, imagine that a tragic fatalism governs their lives, and indulge in utopian dreams while they neglect the ordinary virtues and ignore the daily processes that truly sustain them. Use this statement as the basis for a discussion of *The Seagull*.

3.

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man  
That function is smothered in surmise,  
And nothing is but what is not.

Use these lines as a starting-point for an essay discussing any major theme(s) of *Macbeth* which they suggest to you.

As these instances show, the wording of the topic relating to the quotation can differ; but no matter how the question is worded, it is crucial that you do not ignore the quotation. It will give you information about what the marker expects from you.

1. If the question asks you to agree or disagree or otherwise to make a stand on a statement, make sure that your essay does so. The first question above demands that you assess the validity or otherwise of the claim made by the quotation, on the basis of your reading of the text.

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2. In other cases, the question simply invites you to use the quotation as a 'basis' for your discussion of the text, as in Question 2 above. A close analysis of terms and phrases supplied by the quotation provides the foundations for various parts of the essay: histrionic, grand romance, utopian dreams, ordinary virtues, daily processes. Identifying and describing how these concepts apply to the play, and building connections between the concepts, will constitute your initial mode of enquiry.
  
3. In Question 3, above, the quotation from *Macbeth* provides a starting-point, which does not mean that you can write on anything you like, or ignore the quotation, or leave it behind after citing it in your first paragraph. On the contrary, a careful analysis of these lines will generate a series of points for your essay: in this case, these might include ideas about manhood ("my single state of man"), about thought and fantasy, about action ("function") versus contemplation ("surmise"), or about what "is" versus what "is not." All these concepts are relevant to a reading of *Macbeth*: you could choose to concentrate on developing one into an overall reading of the play, or alternatively, you could pursue each one in turn, as a series of linked points for your essay.

## 2. The Writing Process

By analysing the question, you have already begun the essay writing process. You may have several pages of notes already. Section 2 offers suggestions about the remaining steps that most students find necessary. You need not follow them in this order, or do exactly what is described below but if you are finding it difficult to produce essays or are not getting the grades you expect, you might be neglecting one or more of the following activities:

1. reading, researching, generating and writing down ideas;
2. planning;
3. writing your first draft;
4. reorganising the first draft;
5. writing and organising the second draft, checking the sequence of your ideas;
6. editing sentences, checking your structural logic (third draft);
7. proof-reading (final draft).

Obviously the essay-writing process cannot be completed in one or two days. In order to do well in your coursework, give yourself plenty of time. In fact, one good idea is to leave a gap of a few days between certain stages, for example, between the writing of the first draft (step 3) and its reorganisation and rewriting (steps 4 and 5). The problems with your first written version of the essay will often stand out much more clearly after you have left it to ‘cool’ for a while.

During the academic year, time is short. Organise a timetable for the entire semester, including all your coursework for all your courses. By alternating work on different assignments, you can make progress in several subjects at once without reaching ‘burn-out’ on any one of them.

### 2.1 Generating Ideas and Researching

#### *(i) Generating Ideas*

The least successful way of beginning work on an essay is to sit and wait for inspiration to strike. Here are a few suggestions about the kinds of activity that may get you started; there are of course many other strategies. The following ones can be attempted at any stage of your reading for the course, not just when starting work on an essay. Try to write down some ideas as soon as you have chosen the question, then again while reading the text, and again during and after your research.

#### *(a) Free-writing*

Free-writing involves just what the term implies: writing down everything and anything that occurs to you in relation to the topic or text, without worrying about quality, structure, or even coherence. In fact, free-writing can be helpful at just about any point in the writing process. It helps to get ideas down, and to overcome writer’s block. Because it is uncensored, free-writing is easier to produce than the formal and disciplined writing expected of you in the final draft of your essay. You can use free-writing as a method of recording your reactions to, and

ideas about, a text; as a way of generating ideas when you first look at an essay question; as a way of developing different perspectives on a topic.

The following is a sample of free-writing produced in response to a passage from Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Pit and the Pendulum":

... introduction very long, makes me think of delirium - mental torture  
 - fever. Unstructured disorder. Sentence structure confusing,  
 complicated, complex - lots of breaks, chopping and changing of  
 clauses, disconnected. Distracted. Something about intensity of  
 observation, locking into tiny details, obsession, heightened perception  
 - overreaction - imbalance - climax or crescendo built up at end ...

If you compare this example of free-writing with the final form of an essay, you will see that the material is there to make a good essay, although there is plenty of work still to be done in order to produce a coherent and lucid argument. Free-writing is almost always productive of good essay material.

#### (b) Brainstorming

Some people recommend brainstorming which is a method similar to free-writing, except that what you write is even more fragmented. Take a piece of paper, or a blackboard or whiteboard, and note down words, phrases or thoughts in fragments and in any order as soon as they occur to you and without worrying about whether, or in what way, they are appropriate. As with free-writing, the selection, development, and re-organisation of this material can come later.

Both free-writing and brainstorming are kinds of thinking that are also productive; they get you thinking and writing and reading, all at the same time; all excellent strategies to use when working on your essays.

#### (c) Questions

A rather more methodical means of generating ideas involves asking questions of the topic or the text. When analysing a text, for instance, it may be important to explore some very specific technical questions. The phrasing of the topic may suggest some of these; your tutor may offer others. To further stimulate your thoughts, we have compiled a checklist - by no means an exhaustive one - of questions you might use: see the Appendix at the end of the *Guide*.

#### (d) Thesis Statements

The composition of a *thesis statement* is a good way of producing, clarifying and keeping in touch with the main argument of your essay, that is, your response to the question.

Envisage a question that requires a student to "Discuss the role of the malcontent protagonist in any *two or more* plays from the course." A thesis statement in response to this question might read as follows:

In *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *King Lear*, the 'malcontent' characters act as outcasts and commentators, determined to destroy what has made them 'malcontented'.

A possible thesis statement in response to the following question on Chaucer's "General Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales*: "Compare and contrast the Franklin and the Reeve in terms of the Doctrine of the Humours" might be:

Chaucer uses the doctrine of the four humours in order to differentiate between the Franklin and the Reeve firstly on the basis of appearance. He then shows how the humours impact on every aspect, including appearance, of their character and behaviour.

The most common position for a thesis statement is towards the end of your initial paragraphs. But you may choose to insert your thesis statement into the essay at some other point, to make very clear your response to the question. Alternatively, you may simply employ the thesis statement as a guide, to keep you on track when writing the essay. Remember, if you write a thesis statement early on, you may find that later it needs revision.

## *(ii) Research Methods*

Different kinds of assignment will require different methods of research. A close analysis, for example, because it requires absolute concentration on a small extract, may only require types (a) and (b) below. Other essay topics or questions may require (c) and (d) as well.

### (a) Reading the Text

The single most important research that you can do for any coursework or examination in an English course is to read more than once (which might, of course, mean listening to, or viewing more than once) the primary text(s) you have been asked to discuss.

Whenever you read, take notes about the text, record your thoughts as they occur to you, note the places where scenes or lines of particular interest occur, note sudden ideas and so on. Many students keep a journal or notebook especially for this purpose. Others use a computer to gather their material right from the start, others write in margins, underline, or highlight, then transfer their annotations to a computer.

These rough ideas and fragments of analysis will supplement your lecture notes and your research. The process of taking notes as you read also gets you into certain ways of thinking – critical, analytical and writerly - that are essential for studying written and visual media.

Once you have read the text thoroughly for the first time, use a kind of fast-reading, with your assignment topic in mind, to identify the portions of the text upon which your essay will need to concentrate. You can then apply your close reading skills to these areas.

## (b) Reference Resources in the Library

Any text may contain new words, and references not easily understood; allusions to other writers, places, figures from classical mythology, and so on. If there are explanatory notes in the prescribed edition of your text, read them.

Get into the habit of looking up words, even ones you think you know. Words often carry multiple meanings built up over time. Sometimes words themselves make for rich reading and stimulate new trains of thought. Access your on-line *Oxford English Dictionary* through the Library homepage. The Library is listed in the Quick Link menu on the University's home page to facilitate easy access.

The General Library has a range of reference resources both general and specific, to genres, periods, and writers, that define and explain references in your texts. These resources may be electronic or print. Ask at the Enquiry Desk on Level 1 of the General Library, so that a librarian can direct you to the correct reference resources for your needs.

You can also use the electronic reference service, Ask-a-Librarian. A range of on-line resources can be accessed using your Net ID and Password. Explore. Your library is amazing - figure out how it works and use it. For further course-specific resources that may assist essay writing, check the Library's Course Resource Pages or their Study & Research Help link. Learning how to use the Library effectively is invaluable. Library courses are run frequently. We recommend you take advantage of them.

## (c) Critics

At Stages I and II particularly, students are often unsure to what extent they should read and use ideas from critics. Your tutors and lecturers will give you guidance and reading lists where required.

The following quotation is a useful way to begin thinking about how to use critics:

Reading critical works helps you become aware of the kinds of thinking that can be done in an area of study and often suggests different kinds of approach. Never read critics as a substitute for your own thinking about texts, to have them tell you what to think, but as a way to provoke you into further thought. See what ideas they suggest that you might also consider. Critical reading, like any dialogue, is an interaction between a number of voices. It should never be a passively accepted monologue (Philip Armstrong).

For further comments about how and when to use critics, see the following sections of this *Guide*, on Quotations (4.1) and on Referencing (5).

Reading the published work of scholars in your field is valuable as a writing tool. Look at articles (which after all are a type of essay) in English journals in the Library. How do they begin and end their essays? Can you see a structural logic running through the piece of writing?

Study Notes publications or web-material tend to offer pre-packaged and often outdated readings of texts, designed for students below university level. Essays substantially influenced by these works often do not receive good grades. Use these sparingly. By preference use your Library and its resources, both electronic and hard copy.

#### (d) Background Reading

Some assignments require you to establish the background or context of the text. You may be required to situate a given writer within a literary movement, or a period, or to relate a text to a particular debate, event, or issue. In these cases, your lecturers will give you more specific suggestions about what to read.

#### (e) Markers' Comments on Previous Essays

The comments and criticisms made by markers on your essay are the most important guidance you can get about your writing style and practices. Pay careful attention to these: discuss them with the marker if you need to, and apply suggestions to the next essay you write.

## 2.2 Planning

Collect material and try some drafting before you think about organisation. It is a common experience to be inspired with new ideas while you are writing. Catch your thinking – get it down on paper or in a different file on your computer. Students frequently report that they do not know what they are going to say until they have tried saying it.

At some point, you must think carefully about the organisation of your material, and probably make a written plan of some kind. Here are two approaches to planning an essay; again, there are many others.

#### (a) Diagrams

Some writers find it helpful to visualise their ideas in diagrammatic form before writing. Use lines, arrows, brackets and boxes to indicate graphically the connections between the different points you wish to make.

Below is a list representing the relationships between various points should you be asked to compare the Franklin and the Reeve in the “General Prologue” to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*:

‘compare and contrast’

(b) Outlines or Sketch Plans

The aim of an outline or sketch plan is twofold:

First break your material down into a number of main areas that relate to the topic. These will form the focal points for each paragraph. Roughly speaking, a thousand-word essay might have between five and ten paragraphs, a longer essay will have more. Try to formulate, for each one, a topic sentence that sums up its place in your argument.

Connected with each of these major points will be a number of subsidiary ones. Associated with each point will also be references to the text, or quotations, which offer supporting evidence for that part of your argument.

Second - and less definitively - the plan should put these focal points into a sequence that seems logical and coherent.

For example, the plan for a close analysis of the poem “We, Who Live in Darkness” by Hone Tuwhare, might, with a series of topic sentences, look something like this:

1. “We, Who Live in Darkness” is about the discovery of light, self, and the power to act.
2. The voice in the poem is that of Tu, the father of humankind in Maori mythology.
3. Tuwhare’s poem works by means of progression on different levels.
4. The first level is chronological; the poem takes the reader on a journey through time. (The journey is an important figure in Tuwhare’s work.)
5. Several features of the poem establish an impression of dialogue which progressively draws the reader into the experience being described.
6. The second level concerns the transition from darkness to light, and back to darkness.
7. That transition is paralleled by the movement from ignorance to knowledge and the ‘discovery of self.’
8. There is, however, no return to darkness or ignorance on the final level.
9. Tuwhare’s vocabulary matches these levels of progression with a movement from abstract to concrete imagery.
10. Tensions between the different levels create unexpected and exciting twists in the poem.
11. The title emphasises two important aspects of the poem: the inclusion of the reader in the experience of the poem, and the movement from darkness/ignorance to light/knowledge.

Ultimately, the order that you choose to impose on your material is entirely up to you. Be experimental: write several plans, and think about the various effects created by different sequences of ideas.

Some things to think about when deciding on the sequence of your ideas:

- Do any of your points have to come first, because later points depend on them, modify them, develop them, or contrast with them?
- Are some points relatively general in character? If so, these should probably precede the very specific points. Similarly, the comments likely to be familiar to your reader should usually precede the more novel aspects of your argument.
- Is there an obvious order that the text, or the topic, demands - chronological, spatial, alternating ... ?
- Are there places where the argument will have to change direction in a major way? If so, where is the best place in the essay for that to occur, and how will you signal the shift in focus to the reader?

Finally, this is just a preliminary plan, devised in order to help you towards a first draft. The eventual structure that your essay takes might well be quite different.

### 2.3 Writing the First Draft

Students are sometimes intimidated by the pressure to produce a strong opening sentence or paragraph first up. In fact it is often best to write the opening statements after you have completed the main body of the discussion - by which time you will have a much clearer sense of style of your essay anyway.

The best approach is to break one large task - 'writing an essay' - into a series of smaller, manageable ones. So first choose a single course of your argument - one focal point - and concentrate on that: expand it into a paragraph, adding examples from the text, and developing the idea as you go. Begin with whatever aspect of the topic interests you most, or the point that you feel most confident about, to stimulate your writing. When that paragraph is finished, go on to the next important point.

Remember, this is a first draft only; nothing in it cannot be rewritten, so try not to worry about getting everything perfect. If something confuses or blocks your argument, or threatens to take it off in a totally different direction, then leave it (make a note of where you were – don't lose it) and go on with a different part of the essay.

#### *(i) The Paragraph*

Students often misunderstand the function of the paragraph, and therefore misuse it. Some, for example, follow the journalistic convention of dividing their material into many brief 'paragraphs', comprising only one or two sentences each. This is not appropriate for an academic essay – it produces the impression of fragmentation.

A paragraph is a *unit* of argument; it should be as long (or as short) as it takes to do each of the following:

- establish a point about the topic or the text
- offer supporting material: usually this takes the form of specific references to the text(s) - see the section on **Quotations** for information on how to incorporate quotations into your argument
- develop the point further, without digressing
- relate the point to your overall discussion
- link this paragraph to those that precede and follow it.

#### *(ii) Linking Ideas and Paragraphs*

Linking paragraphs gives a sense of structural coherence and helps to emphasise your argument. There are many ways of doing so, and you should aim to use a variety:

- end your previous paragraph with a sentence that leads into the next point
- begin your new paragraph with a reference to the previous point
- employ (neither overuse nor misuse) transitional words and phrases: ‘consequently’, ‘in addition’, ‘therefore’, ‘however’, ‘in that case’, ‘in spite’ of, etc.

### *(iii) Signposting*

Remind the reader that you are responding to the question (‘signposting’). Avoid using the same signpost in every paragraph:

- echo the question occasionally, by making reference to it in a paragraph, or by translating its key concepts into your own words. Do not repeat the question at any point in your essay, or take phrases from the question and put them in as part of your writing
- re-present your thesis statement, or aspects of it, in different ways, at appropriate moments in the essay
- if you have been asked to make an evaluation or judgement, be sure that you do so quite explicitly at some point in the essay.

### *(iv) Opening and Closing the Essay*

Essays in English - unlike many other subjects at University - often do not require a conventional introduction and conclusion. Your tutor or lecturer may be marking hundreds of essays, and your opening paragraph will be very boring if you just paraphrase the question. For the same reason, avoid variations on the following stock introduction:

In this essay, I will analyse X text by writer Z. I will look at the characters, language, and structure etc. and consider how this contributes to the message ...

- and its counterpart stock conclusion:

In conclusion, I have analysed X text by writer Z. I have discussed how the characterisation, structure and language etc., are employed by the author/director to create a very powerful and effective poem/passage ...

A stock opening you should never employ is the one that begins “Keats was born in 1795 ...” which starts your essay off on the wrong foot: offering general knowledge that is irrelevant to the question.

Instead, you want the opening and closing sections of your essays to tell the reader in advance,

and to reinforce at the end, how *different* this essay is from the other hundred or so that she or he will be marking. Identify something that is characteristic and distinctive about this text, and about your reading of it. Try to begin and end with something specific, dramatic, or eye-catching, a strong, important idea. You will probably find it easiest to write these sections last, after you know what the body of the essay says.

## 2.4 Reorganising the First Draft

In order to revise your first draft in the most objective way possible, you need to get some distance from it. There are several ways of doing this.

(a) Read it out to a friend, or to yourself. What you thought was crystal clear on the page may sound awkward or confusing when read out loud.

(b) Print it out. It is hard to gain a sense of the overall shape of the essay. Do your editing on hard copy. Reading from a screen makes it too easy to think that no more revision is required than just tinkering with a word here and a phrase there. If you print a copy out, label it 'FIRST DRAFT.' Mark clearly what you want to change. You will begin to see the problems more clearly if you read from a drafting frame of mind. It might even be worth choosing a less polished font for your first draft (Courier, for example), to reinforce your sense that this is a rough version.

(c) Summarise the first draft. Try to produce a single-phrase description of the focus or main point of each paragraph. If you cannot do so, there may be a problem with it: too many ideas for one paragraph, confusion in your argument, repetition of ideas, illogical or unclear ordering of points.

You may find that you can incorporate some of these summing-up phrases into your second draft, to make the argument clearer and more explicit at certain points.

(d) Some people even physically cut their first draft (or a copy of it!) into pieces and shuffle them around in different sequences, to get a clearer sense of what effects various re-orderings produce.

## 2.5 Writing the Second Draft

The second draft is not a slightly reworded version of the first. Your second draft will involve substantial rewriting, as well as re-organisation of the order in which you present your ideas.

Make a new plan for your second draft unless the first draft is exceptionally well-ordered. Your new plan may look quite different from the first plan. By now, it should be clear what the best sequence of ideas would be.

## 2.6 Editing Sentences (Third Draft)

Write as many drafts as you need - and have time for - in order to produce the right shape for your argument. (A computer will save you hours of work, as will learning how to touch-type as early in your degree as possible. Scholars these days need to be fast touch typists.) Once you have a draft that seems coherent and well-organised at the level of overall structure, you can concentrate on polishing individual sentences.

Your marker will expect formal English in terms of grammar and style, correct punctuation, and clarity of expression. There are suggestions, in the following section on **Grammar and Style**, about what to be wary of, and what to aim for, in your sentence structure.

## **2.7 Proof-reading (Final Draft)**

The final revision involves proof-reading for errors of various kinds: typos, missing words, spelling mistakes, misquotes, incorrect punctuation. These things irritate your reader, detract from the professionalism (and sometimes the sense) of your work, and can adversely affect your mark.

If you are word-processing, use the spell-check, but be careful. It will not pick up mistakes that are actually correct words in another context (e.g., the wrong their/there/they're; too/two/to, etc.).

Ask a friend or a family member to proof-read your final draft. By this stage, you may be too close to the essay to see mistakes and glitches.

The final step is to ensure that the essay is presented according to the conventions appropriate to English as an academic discipline at The University of Auckland. Sections **5** and **6** will help you here. When in doubt ask your tutor or your course convenor.

### 3. Grammar and Style

As a student in the English Department, you will learn how to recognise the impact of different registers, and styles of writing, upon a reader. You need to be sensitive to this not only in your reading of course texts, but also in your own writing. The style appropriate to one mode of writing may not be suitable for another.

Look at the following extract, from a short story by Bill Manhire:

We were sailing in the Pacific. Seeking out new lands: savages and treasure, sex and mineral rights, you know the sort of thing. Our weaponry very much superior to anything we might meet, the insurance company happy, the holds well stocked, all hands on deck, charts spread out on our knees, tang of sea in our nostrils.

Day after day. Uncle James reading aloud from the Bible.

The South Seas are sprinkled with numberless islands, like stars in the Milky Way. There are whole necklaces of islands, each jewel on the chain is another paradise.<sup>1</sup>

Five out of the seven sentences in this passage are, grammatically speaking, incorrect: sentence fragments (“Day after day. Uncle James reading aloud from the Bible”); run-on or comma-splice sentences (“There are whole necklaces of islands, each jewel on the chain is another paradise”). Manhire is, of course, capable of writing correct English but as a skilled writer he can deliberately employ these kinds of effects to produce a particularly colloquial tone for his narrative. While this is often appropriate for fictional writing - or sometimes for journalism - sentences of this kind are not expected in a formal academic essay.

Generally, in the essays you write for the English Department, your grammar must be correct and your style more formal than in other kinds of writing you may be producing: letters, emails or articles for *Craccum*. The *Guide* describes some of the common errors that occur in undergraduate essays. A serious problem with grammar, however, cannot be dealt with by consulting a writing guide. See your tutor about the help available for students in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Manhire, “Cannibals,” in *Songs of My Life*. (Auckland: Godwit, 1996), 7.

### 3.1 Grammatical Points

#### (i) Sentence Fragments

A sentence in English must have a *subject* and a *predicate* to be grammatically complete:

The poet	wrote.
<i>subject</i>	+ <i>predicate</i>
<i>(the noun or nouns</i>	<i>(says something</i>
<i>that the sentence</i>	<i>about the subject)</i>
<i>is about)</i>	

*the predicate will often consist of*  
*verb + object*

The poet	wrote	a poem.
----------	-------	---------

Although written as if it were a sentence, a fragment is only part of a sentence, such as a phrase or subordinate clause. It will most often follow a perfectly grammatical sentence, upon which it is in fact dependent. Here are some examples:

1. These lines contain images and themes that are crucial to the poem as a whole. Repeated in every stanza.
2. The poet then goes on to describe the scene. One of carnage and death, of violent destruction.
3. Even the title brings to mind images of life and death. ‘Survivors’ signifying an escape from a threatening situation, but also recalling those who did not survive.
4. The poet uses images of warfare and violence. Images which convey a strong feeling of horror to the reader.

#### *Testing for and revising fragments:*

The best way to test whether your sentences are complete is simply to read them out loud to yourself or to a friend. A correct sentence will *sound complete*, by itself: it will have something the sentence is about (a *subject*), and then it will say something about that subject (a *predicate*).

Here are some other ways of checking for incomplete sentences:

Is there a *subject* (i.e. a noun, more than one noun, or a noun phrase, that the sentence is

about)?

If not, supply one or attach the fragment to a related sentence.

Is there a *verb*? Can you identify a main verb that describes what the subject of the sentence is doing, or what is happening to her/him/it/them?

If not, supply one or attach the fragment to a related sentence.

Is there a *dangling participle*? A participle is not a complete verb (for example, 'doing', 'done', 'trying', 'spoken').

For these to function as the main verb of your sentence, you need to add an auxiliary, usually either a form of the verb 'to be' or a form of 'to have' (e.g. 'is doing', 'has done', 'are trying', 'was spoken', etc).

Is there a *subordinating conjunction* (e.g. 'because', 'which', 'that', 'then', 'when', 'after', etc)?

If so, remove it or attach the subordinate clause to a related sentence.

Try these suggestions out on the examples above.

### (ii) *Subject-Verb Agreement*

In a sentence the verb *agrees* with the subject. If the subject is singular, the verb must also be, even if a plural noun intervenes between the two:

*The imagery used in all three poems is unusual.*

If the subject is plural, the verb is plural:

*The images used in this poem are unusual.*

If one subject is singular and one is plural, the verb agrees with the nearer subject:

*Neither Shakespeare nor his contemporaries were writing for publication, but rather for performance.*

### (iii) *Misplaced Modifiers*

Try to avoid the use of a *dangling modifier* - that is, a verbal phrase that does not refer clearly and logically to other words or phrases in the sentence:

*Reading the novel closely, the characters seem flat and lifeless.*

The grammar of this sentence implies that the characters are doing the reading, which makes no sense. It should say

Reading the novel closely, I decide that the characters seem flat and lifeless.

Other misplaced modifiers can produce even odder effects:

In our spare room we have two beds borrowed from friends propped up against the wall.

Ugly and cramped, I crossed the flat off my list of rental options.

Placing the modifying phrase closer to the word to which it refers will help to clarify the sense:

In our spare room we have, propped up against the wall, two beds borrowed from friends.

I crossed the flat, which was ugly and cramped, off my list of rental options.

### 3.2 Common Punctuation Errors

To learn and then to apply rules about punctuation and grammar takes time. Reading good writers is a far more effective means of improving all aspects of your writing style. Using your writer's eye to read other writers' work is always a useful thing to do.

Nevertheless, it can be helpful at times to check up on the rules and clarify what you find in your reading. Here are some of the most common punctuation dilemmas faced by students.

#### (i) Apostrophes

The apostrophe (') is used in two cases only:

1. In *contractions*, to show that a letter or letters have been omitted: e.g. can't (cannot), won't (will not), I'll (I will), she'd (she would), it's (it is).
2. To show *possession*: Mansfield's stories (the stories of Mansfield), Dickens's novels (the novels of Dickens). The apostrophe comes before the s.

Where the noun has been pluralised by the addition of an s, however, the apostrophe comes *after it*: the students' essays (the essays of the students), the poets' names (the names of the poets). In the case of plural nouns, however, the apostrophe comes immediately after the last letter, and therefore *before* the s: children's stories (the stories of children), men's writing (the writing of men).

*Personal pronouns* (I, we, you, he, she, it, they) have their own forms to show possession (my, our, your, his, hers, its, theirs). None of these uses an apostrophe.

Therefore, do not confuse *it's* with *its*, or *who's* with *whose*. *It's* is only ever a contraction for *it is*, while *its* is the possessive form of *it*:

The poem changes its tone [*It*, the poem, is the possessor of the tone].

It's [it is] a brief poem.

*Who's* is the contraction for *who is*, while *whose* is the possessive form of *who*:

Who's [Who is] the speaker in this poem?

Whose voice is speaking? [*Who* is the possessor of the voice]

Don't use apostrophes to indicate a plural. A sentence such as:

Many writers' in the 1990's make this mistake in their essay's.

should be written as follows:

Many writers in the 1990s make this mistake in their essays.

To abbreviate years, write the 'nineties or the '90s or '96.

## (ii) *Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices*

A *run-on* sentence is where sentences that should be separated by a full-stop have been simply run together. For example:

Edmund is a complex character although he behaves like a stereotyped villain at certain moments the audience has sympathy with him.

A *comma splice* is where a comma is used to join sentences that should be separated by a full-stop:

Edmund is a complex character, although he behaves like a stereotyped villain, at certain moments the audience has sympathy with him.

In both cases, the sentence is ungrammatical and unclear in its meaning. In the second case, it is unclear whether the writer means

Edmund is a complex character. Although he behaves like a stereotyped villain, at certain moments the audience has sympathy with him.

Or

Edmund is a complex character, although he behaves like a stereotyped villain. At certain moments the audience has sympathy with him.

(iii) *Semicolons, Colons and Dashes*

These are the three punctuation marks most commonly misused.

(a) The *semicolon* (;) is employed:

1. when you wish to suggest a closer relationship than normal between two complete utterances which could otherwise stand as separate sentences. The example above could also be written as follows:

Edmund is a complex character; although he behaves like a stereotyped villain, at certain moments the audience has sympathy with him.

2. when it is necessary to separate a succession of parallel expressions:

In *Hard Times*, Dickens uses contrasting locations. The factory represents Utilitarianism; the circus stands for imagination.

3. to separate elements which themselves contain commas:

Beckett's plays tend to frustrate any audience expecting to find a linear, coherent plot structure; simple, lucid and conventional dialogue; or characters with clear and consistent motivation.

(b) The *colon* (:) indicates a longer pause than a semicolon, and is used

1. to introduce material that expands upon a statement just made:

The entire passage achieves a highly macabre tone: the images suggest death and decay, and the speaker appears racked by despair.

2. to introduce quotations:

The poem opens with very abstract words and images: 'Something immense? Immeasureless?'

(c) The *dash* (--) was conventionally seen as different from the *hyphen* (-) which is used to join two words that function as a single word (twentieth-century, long-legged). The dash these days is frequently a hyphen with a space at either side - still the length of two hyphens - and can be employed:

1. to put a clause in parenthesis:

Both playwrights are concerned - although in very different ways - to analyze the relationships and conflicts that occur within the nuclear family.

2. to indicate a break in a sentence:

Tu has seen the light - literally and figuratively.

Try not to overuse semicolons, colons and dashes. In most cases a full stop, a conjunction ('and', 'but', 'because') or a comma is preferable.

### 3.3 Some Other Questions of Style

#### (i) Simple, Compound and Complex Sentences

The clearest and most readable writers tend to switch easily between simple, compound and complex sentences.

A *simple sentence* has only a single independent clause:

The story begins with a storm.

A *compound sentence* has more than one independent clause, held together by *co-ordinating conjunctions* (e.g. 'but', 'and', 'or', 'so', 'for', 'nor', 'yet'):

The story begins with a storm *and* ends with a funeral.

A *complex sentence* also has more than one clause, but unlike the compound sentence, one or more of its clauses are subordinate to, or dependent on, a *main clause*. The clauses in a complex sentence are thus joined by *subordinating conjunctions*: that is, conjunctions that make one clause subordinate to another (e.g. because, although, when, after, before, as, which, that):

The story begins with a storm, *which* establishes an atmosphere of conflict.

The story begins with a storm, *because* the writer wishes to establish an atmosphere of conflict.

The story begins with a storm, *although* it is meant to be summertime.

Your choice of conjunctions produces different relationships between the various parts of your sentence. These connections are largely what the process of writing is all about, so construct relationships within and between your sentences with care! Too many simple sentences make your argument seem disjointed. Too many compound sentences can produce the impression of an argument wandering from point to point, without ever establishing links or associations, causes and effects, contrasts and comparisons.

*(ii) Overuse of the Passive*

*Active voice* emphasises the subject as the doer of the action; *passive voice* emphasises the subject as the receiver of the action. An active verb is made passive by adding the auxiliary verb *be* with the base verb. For example:

*Active:* In the second stanza of the poem, images and scenes from childhood *produce* a nostalgic tone.

*Passive:* In the second stanza of the poem a nostalgic tone *is produced* by the images and scenes from childhood.

*Active:* The fragmentation of sentences and phrases towards the end of the last stanza *increases* tension.

*Passive:* Tension *is increased* by the fragmentation of sentences and phrases towards the end of the last stanza.

The active voice tends to be clearer, more concise, and more ‘to the point’ than the passive. Use the passive only rarely; for instance, when you want to suppress responsibility for the action of the verb:

Two completely contradictory meanings for the poem *are produced*; it remains impossible to decide which the poet intended.

*(iii) Tense*

Students often have trouble deciding which tense to use when writing about literature.

The general rule is simple:

- use the *present tense* when discussing, describing, or referring to anything in a text no matter when or where it was written:

The poem *begins* in the remote past ... In stanzas two and three, the poem *moves* into the recent past

Cordelia *dies* at the end of *King Lear*, in spite of the fact that Edmund *tries* to prevent her execution.

- use the *past tense* only for historical assertions or actual events:

Frank Sargeson *wrote* most of his stories while living in a bach in Takapuna.

In sixteenth-century England women’s roles *were* played by men.

*(iv) Vague Qualifiers*

Avoid words or phrases such as ‘strong imagery,’ ‘effective scene,’ ‘powerfully written,’ ‘interesting,’ ‘important,’ ‘unusual.’ These are vague and unsubstantiated; they add nothing to your argument.

If you find such expressions occurring to you, ask yourself “in what *way* is the scene effective?”; “*why* does the imagery seem strong?”, “*what* precisely gives this writing its power?”; “*how* is this text interesting, important or unusual?” Then use these specific and detailed enquiries - not the initial vague impressions that provoked them - in your discussion.

*(v) Sexist Language*

Unless it occurs in a direct quotation from one of your source texts, the use of sexist language in essays is unacceptable.

1. The following substitutions, for example, are simple to make, and more accurate than their exclusive alternatives:

man	human being, person, individual, etc.
mankind	humanity, people, humankind
man’s achievements	human achievement; humankind’s achievements
the best man for the job	the best person/candidate for the job
salesman	sales assistant/person/representative
cameraman	camera operator
fireman	fire-fighter

2. In the case of pronouns (‘he’, ‘him’, ‘his’), there are various options. For example, to revise the following sentence -

If a student is in any doubt about his writing, he can consult his tutor.

(a) ‘He’ can be replaced with ‘he or she’, although in this instance, the repetition of the pronoun makes for a very clumsy sentence:

If a student is in any doubt about her or his writing, she or he can consult her or his tutor.

(b) Translating the pronoun (and therefore the verb) into the plural is often more elegant:

If students are in any doubt about their writing, they can consult their tutor.

(c) Alternatively, you can experiment with other constructions:

Tutors can be consulted regarding students’ doubts about writing.

If in doubt about your writing, consult your tutor.

A tutor will always be available for consultation if any student has doubts about writing.

Notice that each version changes the sense of the original sentence slightly. Most often, in avoiding sexist language, you will produce a stronger sentence; remember that this kind of experimentation and revision is essential to good writing practice at every level.

3. Gender modifiers - 'lady doctor,' 'woman lawyer,' 'male nurse,' 'male model' - are generally patronising, and unnecessary; so are suffixes added to feminise a word which in its usual form should already be unisex: use 'author' rather than 'authoress'; 'poet' rather than 'poetess.'

## 4. Quotations

### 4.1 The Function of Quotations

#### (i) Quoting the Primary Text

An English essay, at all times, substantiates its argument by precise reference to the text(s) under discussion. Often, this will involve quoting.

Here is an example from a close analysis of a passage from “The Pit and the Pendulum”, by Edgar Allan Poe:

We see in the penultimate section (lines 27-9) the drawn-out, slow progress of thought: “And then there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave.” The word that makes sense of the sentence, ‘grave,’ is held off until the very end. Most of this sentence could in fact be omitted or rearranged without significantly altering the meaning; the actual arrangement serves to draw out and put off the impact upon the reader’s mind of the thought.

Notice how this student does not simply import the quotation into the essay and then leave it sitting there inertly. Rather, the quotation is used as an opportunity to analyse part of the text in detail, and in a way that contributes to the overall reading of the passage.

#### (ii) Quoting Critics

You may at times wish to quote comments from critics writing about the text under discussion. As discussed in the earlier section on **Researching (2.1)**, reading critics can be helpful, and incorporating their insights may enrich your own argument. However, in English Literature courses you will be mainly assessed on your own engagement with the text. *A quotation from, or a reference to, a critic - however impressive you may consider it - does not in itself validate your argument or your reading of the text.* Only specific quotation from, or reference to, the primary text can do this.

You may, however, wish to quote a critic in order to lead into a fresh point of your own: for example,

David Rees’s claim that “Westall’s novels certainly won’t help teenagers to feel tenderness” overlooks the genuinely touching episodes in *The Machine-Gunners* (12).

Alternatively - and only occasionally - you might decide that a critic’s wording of a point relating to your own argument is so precise, and so well expressed, that you can’t find a better way of putting it.

## 4.2 Incorporating Quotations Into Your Argument

A quotation may be either introduced with a colon (:), or fitted into the grammar of your sentence. Vary these two techniques. Finding different ways of moving in and out of quotations improves your ability to interact with the work(s) in question, producing a reading that flows seamlessly into and out of the text.

Here are a couple of examples of good incorporation of quotations:

1. From a student essay:

Edmund declares his isolation by rejecting “the plague of custom” [footnote:1.2.3)]. Since his own birth sprang from “the lusty stealth of nature” [footnote: 1.2.11], he feels more affinity with the realm of Nature than the artificial society created by humankind.

2. From a close analysis of a passage from Edgar Allen Poe’s story, “The Fall of the House of Usher”:

The recurrent images of death and decay in this passage serve to create an atmosphere of mystery, isolation and fear. Words such as “decayed,” “discoloration,” “dilapidation,” “crumbling,” and “rotted”; and the colourless images of the “leaden-hued tarn” and the “gray wall,” all create a feeling that the House of Usher is in a setting somehow removed from the real world: “about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity.”

The grammar of a quotation must always match and merge with that of your own sentence. If you need to alter the quotation slightly in order to make it fit, you must clearly indicate that you have done so. For example:

Edmund’s breach of “the bond ... twixt son and father” [footnote: 1.2.108-9] cannot go unpunished.

The original line, from *King Lear*, refers to “the bond cracked twixt son and father”: the omission of a word, in order to fit the quotation into the sentence, is indicated by an *ellipsis* or row of 3 dots.

Now look at this one, from the same essay:

Before dying, however, Edmund repents of what he has done, and makes the effort to do “some good ... / Despite of [his] own nature” [footnote: 5.3.241-2].

Edmund’s comment originally reads as follows: “Some good I mean to do / Despite of my own nature.” The student has omitted a phrase (indicated by an ellipsis), and replaced a first person pronoun (‘my’) with a third person pronoun (‘his’) in order to make the grammar of the

quotation compatible with her own sentence. This replacement of a word by the writer is indicated by square brackets around the insertion.

### 4.3 Referring to Authors and Texts

#### (i) *Authors, Speakers, Narrators*

Use the author's full name the first time you cite it; after that, use only the last name (Shakespeare, Mansfield). Don't use titles (Mr Shakespeare, Ms Mansfield), or first names on their own (William, Katherine). Make sure you spell the name correctly!

Markers will appreciate it if your essay shows an awareness that all forms of fiction create identities (sometimes called *personae*) through which the author expresses different ideas. The speaker of a poem, and the narrator of a novel, are just as fictional, and just as different from the author's actual 'self,' as the characters in a play. You wouldn't write about lines spoken by Lady Macbeth or Hamlet's mother as though they represented the actual ideas and personality of Shakespeare himself. Similarly, with a poem or novel, the ideas and personality of the implied speaker must often be differentiated from those of the author.

Use the following terms and phrases - and vary them - to show your marker that you appreciate the distinction between the author's own voice and the effects created by the text:

- in a poem: the narrator (if the poem tells a story), the speaker, the poem;
- in prose: the narrator, the narrative, the narrative voice, the novel, the story, the passage, the text;
- a play or film is easy enough: all the characters who speak are clearly differentiated; it is only a poem or story that has an implied (but not always named or identified) speaking voice;

#### (ii) *Titles*

Underline or *italicise* the titles of books, journals, novels, plays, films and television programmes; often your marker needs to know whether, for example, you are referring to *Macbeth* (the play) or Macbeth (the character).

For short poems, stories, essays, articles and any text that is part of a longer work, put the title in "quotation marks".

### 4.4 Quotation Format

#### (i) *Brief Quotations*

If you are quoting *less than three lines*, simply use quotation marks to separate the quoted text from your own words (see examples above).



When quoting dialogue from a play, reproduce the way in which the play-script indicates who is speaking, and whether the lines are set out as verse or prose. For example:

The dialogue is full of puns, which show how Romeo enjoys his pretence of melancholy:

Romeo:                                You have dancing shoes  
 With nimble soles. I have a soul of lead  
 So stakes me to the ground I cannot move.  
 Mercutio:        You are a lover. Borrow Cupid's wings  
 And soar with them above a common bound  
 (1.4.14-18).

Notice here that a space is left at the start of Romeo's words because the quotation begins in the middle of a line of verse.

### *(iii) Referencing Quotations*

A few of the examples above do not have page or line references. This is because, if you are writing an analysis of a short piece - a passage, or a short poem - you do not need to keep referring to the same page or two from which it comes; you can assume that the marker has the piece at hand, and can easily find the line in question. But if your marker will have any trouble at all locating your quotes or allusion to the original, you *must* give references.

## 5. Referencing

### 5.1 Why Reference?

In every culture there are ways of acknowledging the contributions to knowledge by those who came before. The University of Auckland's Student Learning Centre has a website which offers excellent referencing guidelines (including models for Chicago, APA and MLA bibliography entries) and some insights on what referencing means in different cultures; go to [www.cite.auckland.ac.nz/index.php](http://www.cite.auckland.ac.nz/index.php) to check it out.

There are many reasons for referencing. In every piece of academic writing, the reader should be able to track all material which is not the writer's own original work back to its source. References which provide tracking information – for instance, author's name, title of work, along with the city, publisher, and date of publication - enable readers to go back to the original source. Academic readers frequently track down referenced sources: they may be interested in getting more detail, they may want another opinion on the matter under discussion, or they may just want to check up on something. As you begin to read more academic articles and books, you will find that you yourself often discover interesting new information, research, and ideas by following up references. References are the doorway into a conversation of scholars. Learning how to provide references is an essential academic skill.

Referencing is a subject that causes students considerable anxiety - especially when they discover that the different disciplines and different departments at the University all have different citation protocols. It is an especial challenge for English literature students to learn this skill, too, because they need to quote from their set texts so much in their assignments. To make it even more challenging, English students' texts may include poetry and plays, films and videos, as well as books and articles. In the English Department our recommended referencing style is Chicago Humanities. Your lecturer or tutor may nominate a different style at the beginning of the course.

### 5.2 Plagiarism

The University of Auckland's policy on plagiarism states that "plagiarism means using the work of others in preparing an assignment and presenting it as your own without explicitly acknowledging, or referencing, where it came from. Plagiarism can also mean not acknowledging the full extent of indebtedness to a source. Work can be plagiarised from many sources – including books, articles, the internet, and other students' assignments. Plagiarism can also occur unconsciously or inadvertently. Direct copying is definitely plagiarism. Paraphrasing of another work without attribution is also plagiarism. Submitting someone else's work or ideas without acknowledgement or attribution is not evidence of your own grasp of the material and cannot earn you marks."

Throughout the University, plagiarism is unacceptable, and is regarded as a form of cheating. The University has drafted a statement on plagiarism to be issued to every student in every course. In your first year, plagiarism may result in your getting no marks for your assignment. At higher levels, you might fail your course and possibly be disciplined by the University. Begin to learn how to acknowledge other people's work right from your first

assignment.

It is particularly easy to download relevant material from the web when researching your essay and later to lose track of where you got it from. Always be scrupulous to identify in your notes work you have borrowed. Don't muddle it up with your own draft, or your notes with your own flashes of insight. Note down sources and referencing information at the time. Do it once, properly and you will not have to spend your time tracking down a reference. Going back to look for references later is a terrible waste of time - and all the more annoying because it is so unnecessary. Do it once and do it as if you need it there and then for a citation.

### 5.3 Acknowledging Sources

(i) *What Needs To Be Acknowledged?*

a. Quotations should always be acknowledged. For example:

Oscar Wilde, who always made a point of disliking Dickens, commented that 'one would have to have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.' [45]

The only exception is if you are quoting from a short text given as part of an analysis essay question.

b. Specialised knowledge, and special definitions, must be acknowledged. For example:

Aristotle defines tragedy as the imitation of a unified action which arouses the emotions of pity and fear (7), but M . H . Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* makes a more basic point - that in a tragedy things turn out badly for the main character [201].

c. Other people's original research, theories, and explanations need to be acknowledged. For example:

Kai Jensen, describing masculinity in New Zealand literature, discusses both appropriate male activities, like practical ingenuity, sport, drinking, soldiering, and fathering children, and a complex of social and emotional behaviours including stoicism, repressing feelings, and talking little [19-34].

d. Common knowledge and information that is readily available in the public domain does not need to be acknowledged - for example: "The *Lyrical Ballads* were published in 1798; nine years after the French Revolution began".

Some lecturers regard their lecture material as having entered the public domain and do not ask their students to acknowledge it, but others require acknowledgement. If in doubt, check.

### 5.4 Using Chicago Style

Chicago Manual of Style (Humanities version) is the recommended style of this department, and one widely used by literary critics.

The first place to look at Chicago Style guidelines is on-line. The full version is at:

<http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home>

*The Chicago Manual of Style* presents two basic documentation systems: (1) notes and bibliography – sometimes referred to as humanities style, and (2) author-date. The English Department uses Chicago humanities.

The notes and bibliography style is preferred by many in the humanities, including those in literature, history, and the arts. This style presents bibliographic information in notes and, often, a bibliography. It accommodates a variety of sources, including esoteric ones less appropriate to the author-date system.

The author-date system has long been used by those in the physical, natural, and social sciences. In this system, sources are briefly cited in the text, usually in parentheses, by author's last name and date of publication. The short citations are amplified in a list of references, where full bibliographic information is provided.

### **Citing your Primary Text**

If you are writing an essay on one particular set text (your primary text) you need to provide, in your essay, a full reference for that text, using both a footnote and an entry in your Bibliography. Use the appropriate method of annotation (i.e. one author, two or more authors, edited book, article and so on). It would say something like:

1. Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. John Davie (Oxford: World's Classics, 1980), 80. All further quotations will be from this edition, and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

### **Notes and Bibliography: Sample Citations**

The following examples illustrate citations using the notes and bibliography system. Examples of notes are followed by shortened versions of citations to the same source, then by the bibliographical listing. For more details and many more examples, see **chapter 14** of *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

#### **Book**

##### **One author**

Full citation in a note:

1. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 99–100.

Shortened citation in a note:

2. Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, 3.

Entry in a bibliography :

3. Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

### **Two or more authors**

1. Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The War: An Intimate History, 1941–1945* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 52.
2. Ward and Burns, *War*, 59–61.
3. Ward, Geoffrey C., and Ken Burns. *The War: An Intimate History, 1941–1945*. New York: Knopf, 2007.

For four or more authors, list all of the authors in the bibliography; in the note, list only the first author, followed by *et al.* (“and others”):

1. Dana Barnes et al., *Plastics: Essays on American Corporate Ascendance in the 1960s . . .*
2. Barnes et al., *Plastics . . .*

### **Editor, translator, or compiler instead of author**

1. Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 91–92.
2. Lattimore, *Iliad*, 24.
3. Lattimore, Richmond, trans. *The Iliad of Homer*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

### **Editor, translator, or compiler in addition to author**

1. Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, trans. Edith Grossman (London: Cape, 1988), 242–55.
2. García Márquez, *Cholera*, 33.
3. García Márquez, Gabriel. *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Translated by Edith Grossman. London: Cape, 1988.
1. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, ed. Keir Elam (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2008), III.ii.120-25.
2. Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, III.iii.107.
3. Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. Edited by Keir Elam. London: Arden, 2008.

### **Chapter or other part of a book**

1. John D. Kelly, “Seeing Red: Mao Fetishism, Pax Americana, and the Moral Economy of War,” in *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency*, ed. John D. Kelly et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 77.
2. Kelly, “Seeing Red,” 81–82.
3. Kelly, John D. “Seeing Red: Mao Fetishism, Pax Americana, and the Moral Economy of War.” In *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency*, edited by John D. Kelly, Beatrice

Jauregui, Sean T. Mitchell, and Jeremy Walton, 67–83. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

### **Chapter of an edited volume originally published elsewhere (as in primary sources)**

1. Quintus Tullius Cicero. “Handbook on Canvassing for the Consulship,” in *Rome: Late Republic and Principate*, ed. Walter Emil Kaegi Jr. and Peter White, vol. 2 of *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization*, ed. John Boyer and Julius Kirshner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 35.
2. Cicero, “Canvassing for the Consulship,” 35.
3. Cicero, Quintus Tullius. “Handbook on Canvassing for the Consulship.” In *Rome: Late Republic and Principate*, edited by Walter Emil Kaegi Jr. and Peter White. Vol. 2 of *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization*, edited by John Boyer and Julius Kirshner, 33–46. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. Originally published in Evelyn S. Shuckburgh, trans., *The Letters of Cicero*, vol. 1 (London: George Bell & Sons, 1908).

### **Preface, foreword, introduction, or similar part of a book**

1. James Rieger, introduction to *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xx–xxi.
2. Rieger, introduction, xxxiii.
3. Rieger, James. Introduction to *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, xi–xxxvii. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

### **Book published electronically**

If a book is available in more than one format, cite the version you consulted. For books consulted online, list a URL; include an access date only if one is required by your publisher or discipline. If no fixed page numbers are available, you can include a section title or a chapter or other number.

1. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2007), Kindle edition.
2. Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner, eds., *The Founders’ Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), accessed February 28, 2010, <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/>.
3. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.
4. Kurland and Lerner, *Founder’s Constitution*, chap. 10, doc. 19.
5. Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2007. Kindle edition.
6. Kurland, Philip B., and Ralph Lerner, eds. *The Founders’ Constitution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Accessed February 28, 2010. <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/>.

## **Journal article**

### **Article in a print journal**

In a note, list the specific page numbers consulted, if any. In the bibliography, list the page range for the whole article.

1. Joshua I. Weinstein, "The Market in Plato's *Republic*," *Classical Philology* 104 (2009): 440.
2. Weinstein, "Plato's *Republic*," 452–53.
3. Weinstein, Joshua I. "The Market in Plato's *Republic*." *Classical Philology* 104 (2009): 439–58.

### Article in an online journal

Include a DOI (Digital Object Identifier) if the journal lists one. A DOI is a permanent ID that, when appended to <http://dx.doi.org/> in the address bar of an Internet browser, will lead to the source. If no DOI is available, list a URL. Include an access date only if one is required by your publisher or discipline.

1. Gueorgi Kossinets and Duncan J. Watts, "Origins of Homophily in an Evolving Social Network," *American Journal of Sociology* 115 (2009): 411, accessed February 28, 2010, doi:10.1086/599247.
2. Kossinets and Watts, "Origins of Homophily," 439.
3. Kossinets, Gueorgi, and Duncan J. Watts. "Origins of Homophily in an Evolving Social Network." *American Journal of Sociology* 115 (2009): 405–50. Accessed February 28, 2010. doi:10.1086/599247.

### Article in a newspaper or popular magazine

Newspaper and magazine articles may be cited in running text ("As Sheryl Stolberg and Robert Pear noted in a *New York Times* article on February 27, 2010, . . .") instead of in a note, and they are commonly omitted from a bibliography. The following examples show the more formal versions of the citations. If you consulted the article online, include a URL; include an access date only if your publisher or discipline requires one. If no author is identified, begin the citation with the article title.

1. Daniel Mendelsohn, "But Enough about Me," *New Yorker*, January 25, 2010, 68.
2. Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Robert Pear, "Wary Centrists Posing Challenge in Health Care Vote," *New York Times*, February 27, 2010, accessed February 28, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/us/politics/28health.html>.
3. Mendelsohn, "But Enough about Me," 69.
4. Stolberg and Pear, "Wary Centrists."
5. Mendelsohn, Daniel. "But Enough about Me." *New Yorker*, January 25, 2010.  
Stolberg, Sheryl Gay, and Robert Pear. "Wary Centrists Posing Challenge in Health Care Vote." *New York Times*, February 27, 2010. Accessed February 28, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/us/politics/28health.html>.

### Book review

1. David Kamp, "Deconstructing Dinner," review of *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, by Michael Pollan, *New York Times*, April 23, 2006, Sunday Book Review, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/23/books/review/23kamp.html>.
2. Kamp, "Deconstructing Dinner."

3. Kamp, David. "Deconstructing Dinner." Review of *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, by Michael Pollan. *New York Times*, April 23, 2006, Sunday Book Review. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/23/books/review/23kamp.html>.

### **Thesis or dissertation**

1. Mihwa Choi, "Contesting *Imaginaires* in Death Rituals during the Northern Song Dynasty" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008).
2. Choi, "Contesting *Imaginaires*."
3. Choi, Mihwa. "Contesting *Imaginaires* in Death Rituals during the Northern Song Dynasty." PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008.

### **Paper presented at a meeting or conference**

1. Rachel Adelman, "'Such Stuff as Dreams Are Made On': God's Footstool in the Aramaic Targumim and Midrashic Tradition" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 21–24, 2009).
2. Adelman, "Such Stuff as Dreams."
3. Adelman, Rachel. "'Such Stuff as Dreams Are Made On': God's Footstool in the Aramaic Targumim and Midrashic Tradition." Paper presented at the annual meeting for the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 21–24, 2009.

### **Website**

A citation to website content can often be limited to a mention in the text or in a note ("As of July 19, 2008, the McDonald's Corporation listed on its website . . ."). If a more formal citation is desired, it may be styled as in the examples below. Because such content is subject to change, include an access date or, if available, a date that the site was last modified.

1. "Google Privacy Policy," last modified March 11, 2009, <http://www.google.com/intl/en/privacypolicy.html>.
2. "McDonald's Happy Meal Toy Safety Facts," McDonald's Corporation, accessed July 19, 2008, <http://www.mcdonalds.com/corp/about/factsheets.html>.
3. "Google Privacy Policy."
4. "Toy Safety Facts."
5. Google. "Google Privacy Policy." Last modified March 11, 2009. <http://www.google.com/intl/en/privacypolicy.html>.
6. McDonald's Corporation. "McDonald's Happy Meal Toy Safety Facts." Accessed July 19, 2008. <http://www.mcdonalds.com/corp/about/factsheets.html>.

### **Blog entry or comment**

Blog entries or comments may be cited in running text ("In a comment posted to *The Becker-Posner Blog* on February 23, 2010, . . .") instead of in a note, and they are commonly omitted from a bibliography. The following examples show the more formal versions of the

citations. There is no need to add *pseud.* after an apparently fictitious or informal name. (If an access date is required, add it before the URL; see examples elsewhere in this guide.)

1. Jack, February 25, 2010 (7:03 p.m.), comment on Richard Posner, “Double Exports in Five Years?,” *The Becker-Posner Blog*, February 21, 2010, <http://uchicagolaw.typepad.com/beckerposner/2010/02/double-exports-in-five-years-posner.html>.
2. Jack, comment on Posner, “Double Exports.” *Becker-Posner Blog, The*. <http://uchicagolaw.typepad.com/beckerposner/>.

### **E-mail or text message**

E-mail and text messages may be cited in running text (“In a text message to the author on March 1, 2010, John Doe revealed . . .”) instead of in a note, and they are rarely listed in a bibliography. The following example shows the more formal version of a note.

1. John Doe, e-mail message to author, February 28, 2010.

### **Item in a commercial database**

For items retrieved from a commercial database, add the name of the database and an accession number following the facts of publication. In this example, the dissertation cited above is shown as it would be cited if it were retrieved from ProQuest’s database for dissertations and theses.

Choi, Mihwa. “Contesting *Imaginaires* in Death Rituals during the Northern Song Dynasty.” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008. ProQuest (AAT 3300426).

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*The Chicago Manual of Style* 16th edition text © 2010 by The University of Chicago.

*The Chicago Manual of Style Online* © 2006, 2007, 2010 by The University of Chicago.

Remember that the reader should always be able to trace any quotation or borrowed material back to its source. After your first year, begin to get familiar with the full version of Chicago Humanities. By the time you are a graduate student you will be very familiar with citation and the ways of presenting excellent work. For further information on referencing, especially on those tricky electronic sources, we recommend our own university’s [www.cite.auckland.ac.nz/quick.php](http://www.cite.auckland.ac.nz/quick.php)

## 6. Presentation of Your Essay

The English Department has clear rules on essay presentation, designed to make your work clear and accessible to the marker, and to leave space for comments and grades.

Give your work room to breathe and think about your layout on the page. Crammed work is not well-presented work. Your essay is an important piece of work, part of your degree; think about how you present it.

We require of you the following:

- a. All essays should be typed on A4 paper.
- b. Leave a margin at least 5cm wide on the left-hand side of each page for comments.
- c. Write on one side of the paper only.
- d. Each page should be numbered and carry your name in the top right hand corner.
- e. Submit your essay to Turnitin.

Always keep a hard copy of your assignment.

There are coversheets provided for all Stage I, II and III essays in City Campus courses, to ensure that your essay shows the necessary information:

- your name and ID number
- the course name and title
- the assignment number
- the topic
- your tutor's name

- your tutorial day and time
- the date the assignment is due

Staple the coversheet to your essay, fill out the information required and place your essay in the appropriate box outside the English Department Office, or in the boxes outside the English Office in Old Choral Hall.

Computer failure is always a possibility. Ensure that you understand the software you are using, make frequent back-up copies of your files, (one option is to e-mail them to your official university e-mail address) and generate a hard copy as early as possible: computer trouble does not excuse the non-appearance of an essay. Keep both a hard copy and an electronic copy of your essay. Essays can go missing, and if the Department has no record of your having submitted an assignment, you cannot be given a mark. Put your essay through the Turnitin system and keep your Turnitin e-mail details once they arrive.

## **Appendix: Writing Analysis or ‘Close Reading’ Essays**

### **A Checklist**

Students faced with a piece of writing and requested to analyse it often panic and feel they have nothing to say. Here are some ways to think about a text, in case you get stuck. But be cautious: not all suggestions will apply, and merely working through these mechanically won't in itself produce an essay.

1. Who is the speaker or narrator? What sort of voice is doing the talking in this text? Is this speaker reliable? How do you know? What words, phrases or markers indicate this? Who sees in this text? Is the one who speaks (narrator) different from the one who sees (focaliser)? How much does the speaker/narrator know?
2. Can an addressee be identified? If so, who is addressed? What sort of reader or audience is implied by the text? How do you know? What words, phrases, or other markers help construct the implied reader?
3. What ideas or issue(s) is this text concerned with? How far is a specific position being taken on an idea?
4. What is/are the function/s or purpose of this piece of writing? Does it seek to amuse, to impress, to persuade, to inform, to satirise or parody, to command, to narrate, to puzzle, to deceive, to describe, to evoke....?
5. How would you describe the style of this writing? Is it colloquial, slangy, elevated, poetic, ornate, ironic, comic, archaic, playful, puzzling ...? Is there more than one style in operation? Which words or phrases indicate the style most clearly? Try to think through the purposes of the stylistic choices made here.

6. Are there noticeable changes (turning points) in approach, language, mood, direction, styles; are there switches from one aspect to another of the subject matter?

7. What effect does the passage have on you as a reader? Why does it have that effect? Can you imagine the passage having a very different effect on other readers - from another social class, race, country, gender, different historical period, etc.?

8. What is the genre of the work? Is there a recognisable pattern present in the extract like tragedy, comedy, romance, science fiction, farce, etc.? Are genres being combined, contested, challenged, parodied ...?

9. Can you identify the ideological assumptions of the text? What values, ideas, or perspectives does it take for granted? Are these different from your own, and if so, how does this disparity affect your reading of the text?

Of course, there are a multitude of other questions to consider; often, lecturers and tutors will produce their own handouts containing more specific guidelines for the kinds of analysis appropriate in their particular field. Your tutorials are an important place to discuss some of these questions.

## Close Reading Poetry

### What is this poem doing?

A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it. . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge. (Charles Olson)

### Basic principles

Above all you need to read poems slowly. There is normal reading speed (this is how you'll hear most poems delivered) and there is a much lower gear which engages attention to detail. Use it.

It is also helpful to compare notes with other readers. This is one of the reasons tutorials are important – everyone learns something new about a poem when it is discussed in a group situation.

In addition, you will learn that there are various contexts to which the poems can be related (e.g. when was the poem written, and where? What types of language does it use? What sort of poem is it?). The lectures should help inform you about contexts of this kind.

Don't worry too much at the outset about meaning in the poem. You always know far more than you think you do about a piece of writing. Instead of asking *What does this mean?* try asking *What is this part of the poem doing?* The question and answer process outlined below should supply a significant amount of information about the poem from which you can begin to consider its 'meaning'.

Getting into a poem:

### 1. Read it slowly

You must pay the poem the same kind of attention you would give to an important conversation. The poem is an invitation to attend. Read it through several times; if possible read it aloud.

Look up any words that puzzle or intrigue you in a dictionary. Dictionaries are not only for inexperienced readers – most poets use a dictionary as they work. Similarly, you may look up unfamiliar names or allusions in an encyclopaedia (for example, a reference to classical mythology or an event in history). You may not be able to locate every reference but don't be concerned about it – it is usually possible to get some sense of a poem even if the occasional line remains obscure.

### 2. Emotion, tone and subtext

Try to sense some of the emotion. The emotion is indicated by the choice of words. But keep the overall situation in mind – and remember that human beings are complicated – we don't always say exactly what we mean. Sometimes we are ironic or tongue-in-cheek; sometimes we say little when we feel deeply; sometimes we strike a pose; sometimes we hedge around what we really feel. We can see this complexity in everyday human life, so naturally it is also present in poetry. It's different from 'symbolic meaning' – rather, it's the emotional dimension. You'll be talking about this also when you study fiction and drama. Actors call it the 'emotional subtext' and have to take it into account when they rehearse – it's not enough simply to memorise lines of dialogue.

The word 'tone' is sometimes used to mean 'emotion' or 'mood'; or it may refer more specifically to the tone of voice in which it seems appropriate to read the poem. The tone of voice may change in the course of the poem – watch out for the changes.

Imagine, in reading the poem, that you are listening to someone on the phone. It's an emotional phone conversation and it's important for you to interpret the emotions of the person on the other end of the line. You can't judge facial expression or body language; you must rely on changes in the tone of voice. Is that person cheerful, elated, joking, meditative, angry, sad, disappointed or holding back his or her feelings? Sometimes the answer may be obvious; sometimes it may not.

### 3. Connections

Can you link up any of the words and images, connecting one line with another? Are any patterns emerging?

### 4. Language

Is the style formal or informal? Is there a mixture of formal and informal? Fully formed grammatical structures or fragmented syntax? Do certain words stand out as unusual? Often it's the unusual or puzzling word that holds the key to what is most intense in a poem.

### 5. Rhythm

How does the poem move, what sort of rhythm does it have? Does it flow or jump, and does this have anything to do with its subject matter? Reading the poem aloud is the best way to pick up its rhythm.

### 6. Title

When you've read the poem to the end, consider the title again. Is it an obvious choice? Does it draw attention to a particular aspect of the poem? Some poems don't have titles and some titles act more like part of the first line, flowing without interruption into the body of the text.

### 7. Sensations

Try to see and hear the scenes being conjured up. This makes the poem more vivid and often helps to clarify the meaning. Does the poem encourage the reader to see, hear, smell, taste and touch? The transfer of energy which Olson talks about is most obvious when you as reader pick up sensory information worked into the poem by its author.

### 8. The poem overall

Consider the poem overall. What is its most intense aspect? Are there shifts or changes in the course of the poem? You may find it useful to divide a poem into several sections, to think about one part at a time.

### 9. Revision

Does the later part of the poem reinforce your early interpretations? If not you should consider some re-thinking. Re-read the poem carefully and see if you've missed anything or possibly wandered off-course. It's better to be tentative in discussing possible interpretations than to be over-confident and to oversimplify the poem.