

ADVANCED ENGLISH ESSAY WRITING GUIDE

A quality essay will use excellent technique (essay structure, linkage, style) to accompany good material (relevant quotes and techniques). Technique can be learnt, adapted, applied and re-applied until it becomes a fully functioning part of your English arsenal to be used at will. In other words, once you learn it, it stays with you. Material, however, is disposable. You will probably use different material for EVERY essay you write, if your technique is good enough and you're not some automaton that memorises essays for fun, in which case I salute you.

The stuff that is taught in class, and therefore the stuff you learn in class, is material. That is, quotes that are relevant, a new technique or two, or the historical context that helps a quote make sense. This is excellent if you've spent years 7-11 perfecting your essay writing style and structure. Unfortunately, you haven't.

Teaching on essay writing in the classroom is usually restricted to writing an acronym on the board, usually PEAL (Point, Evidence, Analysis, Link), PACT (Purpose, Analysis, Context, Techniques) or even SEXY (Statement, Evidence, Xplanation and Your position - a BOS favourite, can't imagine why). This is expected to jog your memory with stuff you've never been taught or were daydreaming when it was brought up (often the best case scenario). That's where it's usually left, and you immediately begin analysing the text because the exam's only 5 weeks away. Most of the time, it's not enough.

The most common issue with Advanced and Standard students is that they have no idea how to structure an essay. Often, I hear this in the form of 'I don't get English' or 'English is so subjective' or 'I give up, I don't know what to do.' The truth is: You already know everything you need to know in terms of what you have to write down on exam day. What this guide will do is show you how to order it and present it in a way that markers like. You will also find that once you get this down pat, your marks will improve freakishly.

THE SYLLABUS AND YOU

You're a teenager. You have multiple commitments, including but not limited to your subjects (of which English is one of maybe 6 or 7), sports, social life, co-curricular activities, extracurricular activities and a pr0n collection that's not going to get through itself. You're busy.

Markers know this.

They're not expecting some devastating Marxist critique of Shakespeare in a scene where no scholar has dared venture. They don't want or need to know the post-colonial existential context of Jane Austen within the Hobbesian paradigm. Just keep it simple, understandable, and (above all) relevant. As a year 12 in NSW, you are one of sixty thousand people whom markers wish would write shorter, clearer, more concise sentences. And all they ever look for is: how material in a text answers the question they give you. Sophistication is no substitute for technique; the English syllabus is designed so that the top band is within reach of the stupidest kid, as long as they work hard. Essay technique is the base of your analysis. Sophistication is only the icing.

In other words: A simple sentence that answers the question is **MUCH BETTER** than a complex one that does not.

If you take nothing else out of this, know this: No amount of study you do will get you marks above somebody who has studied enough and whose essay writing technique is better.

INTRODUCTIONS

Introductions are strange beasts. Many teachers claim they mean little to nothing, as long as your body paragraphs are good. Others claim that they set expectations which they mark to for the rest of the essay. Most markers fall somewhere in between. Intros do three things:

- **Give an impression of your writing style**
- **Set expectations of what material you will bring in**
- **Show how many holes you've left in your preparation**

Intros, honestly, should mean very little. But they give away too much about what kind of writer, studier and BS-artist you are. The marker can't help but notice after they've marked essays all year, had practice ones slid under their door and have probably gotten through about two-hundred-plus that day before they've hit yours. They instinctively know which essays are going to be good and what aren't as soon as they've finished reading an intro. It doesn't take a lot of deduction to say that they usually mark to the expectations set in your intro – consciously or unconsciously.

It is crucial that you leave no holes unplugged in your intro. Intros are where you get to throw around all the analytical crapola that you get taught at the start of the course:

- Text type
- Target audience
- Purpose of writing
- Text's historical context
- Greater statement on human condition/dehumanisation of society/sexualisation of youth/tastiness of Krispy Kreme – you get the picture.

This is the one place where you are granted full permission to make sweeping statements on the text itself without being immediately expected to back it up. Make sure, however, that these analytical terms are all incorporated in some way. A good intro usually takes about half-to-three-quarters of an essay booklet page. Bad ones go for a quarter of a page, and terrible ones go for a page and a bit because the marker knows you're faffing and haven't studied.

A suggested order of sentencing (that is, one that's hard to screw up):

Necessary:

- General comment on the nature of the question
- Introduce your thesis (could be a reading, or just a theme you come back to) and how they intersect with the question (in other words, your thesis is your position on the question)
- Introduce text/s.
- Mention how the text type/s is particularly special in helping your thesis resonate with the target audience.
- How this theme remains relevant despite the author's context fading into history (only if author is dead)
- How this theme is a relevant reflection of contemporary society (only if author is alive)
- Brief reference to narratives of texts

Optional (can insert anywhere in intro, within reason):

- How these themes are in line with the purpose of the author (better for Module A and B)
- How the author's historical context drove his/her purpose to compose this text (Modules A and B)
- How the techniques/representation used prove the question or ram the thesis home (Module C)

This is quite a bit to digest. Here's an example:

Practice Question: How does your chosen text enhance your understanding of personal interaction? Use your core text and one related text.

Practice Texts: Animal Farm (Orwell, 1945), Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (Rowling, 1999).

Practice Intro:

The nature of personal interaction is that (leads into your thesis) it cannot be summed up in a single, simple dialogue between people – **they are only signposts that show where their relationship is going or from where it has arrived from (thesis)**. Personal interaction cannot be restricted to isolated dialogue, which is only the reflection of relationships that in turn grow and change over time. This idea of **relationships as constantly changing entities is shown in both George**

Orwell's Animal Farm and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (introducing texts). Through this, it is evident that prose narrative as a text type (text type) gives an author unusual freedom (how the text type works) in which to detail the dynamics of a relationship to their audience through evolving depictions of dialogue (technique). It rings particularly true to the inconsistency of relationships when such a message is as equally relevant to pigs taking control of a farm as it is to a boy wizard and his estranged uncle (summary of texts), set over fifty years apart (context).

Important bits bolded.

It's possible to pre-write them if you have a decent idea of what the question's going to be. Otherwise, just follow the checklist.

BODY PARAGRAPHS (skip at own risk)

These are slightly harder, and MUCH more important. Basically, you're expected to prove the theme you brought out in the intro by using examples from the texts. Or even more simply, just give quotes significance and meaning.

This is the 'body' of your essay. It's basically the engine room of your argument. Remember that these paragraphs aren't exercises in rhetoric or wordiness, they're exercises in logic. Rhetoric is tested in the Creative section of the exam. Here, you are tested as to how quickly and how clearly you think, within a pre-determined paragraph structure.

There's no point saying anything if it can't be a) understood or b) made relevant. Because of this, there are some golden rules:

1. **Make sure one sentence follows onto another.** Can't stress how important this is. If a sentence appears difficult to understand or place into context, the marker will thank whatever gods they have if they re-read the previous sentence and suddenly understand everything.
2. **DO NOT NEGLECT TECHNIQUES!** I had a similar problem in year 12 where I began a paragraph with the best of intentions, and then just listed the quote and the analysis, without explaining how the analysis was justified by the quote. This is unfortunately impossible without a technique in Advanced and Standard English. I'm sure it's possible in the real world, but that's a year away and where you stand in the real world is determined in no small way by English markers. You're free to disagree, but you will fail to varying degrees if you neglect techniques outright. Sad but true.
3. **This is what I call 'the bridge of English marking logic'.**

TEXT | Quote=====Technique=====Linkage | MEANING

]~~~~~[

^ River of Fail

To go from text to meaning (which is where I desperately hope you want to go), you're going to have to navigate this bridge over the River of Fail. The marker will thank you, given that most people prefer to swim. And sink.

Here's a tried-and-true paragraph structure. It comes in six parts, and is a little more complicated than what you may have seen before:

- 1. Thesis**
- 2. Contextualisation**
- 3. Quote/Evidence**
- 4. Technique**
- 5. Linkage**
- 6. Reference back to question**

A bit more in-depthly:

1. Thesis: What you set out to prove. Usually one sentence. This usually comes from the dominant theme or thesis you put out in your intro, and is ALWAYS in line with your position on the question (you'd be amazed how many people let that slip). Variations on your thesis are extremely good. If your thesis is, say, a Marxist reading, make one of your themes 'the development of Marxist thought through character development' or 'the use of emotion in personifying Marxism' etc. You will, of course, be restricted by the question in this regard. Make sure you mix it up, though. Five identical thesis statements heading each paragraph is not a good look.

2. Contextualisation: At what point in the story your evidence comes from (bonus points for act and scene numbers). Much easier than it sounds. Basically, you're setting the scene for your quote, or painting a picture within which your quote is said. Try to include who it was said by, who it was said to, and where it was said (less important if said during a significant event in the text, which you should mention instead). The reason for contextualisation is the unfortunate tendency for people to make up quotes on the spot. Including the scene where you found your evidence invites the marker to check you on your honesty. It also helps enormously in 'giving a feel' to the general vibe of your quote, so the marker can see you're using it appropriately and not twisting it to mean the opposite of what the author intended it to be (or at least, didn't intend it not to be).

3. Quote: Your hard evidence. Taken straight from the text. Must be word-for-word, given the marker can check the quote if you contextualise properly, and excluding or changing one word can give a sentence opposite meaning (like 'not', 'no', or swapping 'if' and 'unless'). The length can range anywhere from one word to two paragraphs. The only

part of your essay (apart from techniques) that absolutely **MUST** be memorized.

4. Technique: What gives quotes significance and meaning with the target audience. Similes, metaphors, imagery, personification etc. Absolutely vital. Having no technique means it's impossible to justify whatever significance you get out of your quote, which kills your linkage. Which, as you'll come to find, kills your essay.

5. Linkage: What the significance of your quote is, and how it answers the question. I have come to believe, after much learning, tears, practice, failure, arguments, trial, error, and tutoring that a good 70-80% of marks are allocated on the quality of linkage. It is the final step on the journey from words to meaning. This is the part that takes the most practice, and can rarely be memorised word-for-word to use on exam day.

Linkage usually takes the form of: The use of (technique) makes the audience feel (significance), and this means they can identify with (your thesis). As a result, (your thesis) is an especially relevant take on (the question).

It can take several sentences to get this across if the technique is complicated, the significance is hard to explain, or your thesis and the question are awkward to slot into a single sentence. Use as many sentences as you need, because this is where your marks are coming from.

It goes without saying that the significance and your thesis have to be closely related. It also goes without saying that your technique has to be justified in giving the significance it does. The use of repetition, for instance, does not mean Hamlet is a post-colonial play. Make it logical.

Do. Not. Neglect. This. Ever! It is the difference between a 60 and an 85, or a 90 and a 98. Too much rides on your linkage for you to ignore it. Practice it. Many, many times. Then practice it some more. It's a skill to learn, not a fact to memorise; once you get it right, it doesn't ever go away.

Of course, there are plenty of variations on the bolded sentence. This is just something to practice with, and maybe fall back on when you get stuck.

6. Reference to question: Statement that your thesis answers the question. It was mentioned in the linkage section. I'll show it again: As a result, (your thesis) is an especially relevant take on (the question). This is what most people mistake for linkage, and then don't actually link. In reality, this is just the icing on the cake. Don't ignore it, though. You don't need to justify the link between the thesis and the question here – you did it in your first sentence.

This paragraph structure should be fail-safe. It's exactly the one I used for every paragraph I wrote in the Advanced English HSC exam.

Practice Body Paragraph (easy)

The numbers are there to show what stage of the paragraph it's up to (1 for Thesis, 2 for Context, etc. – refer to the original list)

Practice question: How does your chosen text communicate the idea of belonging?

Sample text: Call Of the Horizon (Jaksic, Sydney Morning Herald, 2/08/09)

Brief synopsis: Interview of Ernie Dingo on where he wants to travel

(1) Call Of The Horizon communicates the idea of belonging as a form of attraction towards a particular destination. (2) This is evident in the subject's dialogue with the author, when he says (3) 'Don't tell the Kiwis, (but) I would go back to New Zealand tomorrow.' (4) The use of a hypothetical in 'go back to New Zealand tomorrow.' (5) implies his readiness to go there despite the accompanying difficulties of embarking with a day's notice, and the aside of 'don't tell the Kiwis' recognises that such a sense of a belonging to a foreign country, for an Australian, is unusual. (6) Therefore, the article manages to use these devices in order to depict belonging as a readiness to be near to or in a place.

Practice Body Paragraph 2 (harder)

Practice question: How does your chosen text communicate the idea of belonging?

Sample text: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (Rowling, 2007)

(1) Rowling depicts the most obvious sense of belonging as belonging within the community; in other words, the community recognising and accepting the protagonist. However, she also shows the concept of belonging as being a necessary part of a storyline's resolution. (2) This is

shown in the immediate reaction from others after the resolution of Harry and Voldemort's climactic duel. (3) The narration of 'Harry was an indispensable part of the mingled outpouring of jubilation and mourning, of grief and celebration' is depicted entirely through (4) sustained emphasis on Harry, via the adjective of indispensable, between two wildly juxtaposed states of emotion. (5) The sentence, although dominated by evocative imagery, keeps Harry's 'belonging' as its focus; that is, belonging within the emotion displayed by the secondary characters and therefore 'belonging' as a part of the climax of the story. Rowling consequently integrates Harry into two different states of 'belonging': the esteem given to him by the story's other characters despite their emotional state, and his integrated belonging into the story through the emphasis placed on him in its climax. (6) This gives a multi-layered idea of belonging within the narrative as shown by Rowling.

In this case, the significance of the quote is taken from its point in the story, which happened to be the climax. You can take the significance of the quote from anywhere, as long as you fix your linkage to reach that significance.

If you took the linkage out, this paragraph would still appear normal enough in an English essay:

(1) Rowling depicts the most obvious sense of belonging as belonging within the community; in other words, the community recognising and accepting the protagonist. (2) This is shown in the immediate reaction from others after the resolution of Harry and Voldemort's climactic duel. (3) The narration of 'Harry was an indispensable part of the mingled outpouring of jubilation and mourning, of grief and celebration' is depicted entirely through (4) sustained emphasis on Harry, via the adjective of indispensable, between two wildly juxtaposed states of emotion. (6) This gives an idea of belonging within the narrative as shown by Rowling.

....which is fair enough, but the paragraph would get more of a 15/20 instead of 18 or 19, which you should be shooting for.

Why would it get a lesser mark? It leaves questions unanswered.

1. How does the technique help the reader understand the idea of belonging?

2. Just how are the states of emotion juxtaposed? Is it done through Harry's perspective? Is the description of each state of emotion different? Etc. This is a free technique/link gone begging.

3. What specific sense of belonging are we shooting for? Harry belonging among other characters, or Harry belonging within the text? Sure, we put it in the thesis statement but that doesn't mean we proved it.

Notice how these are all answered in the linkage. It's that important. Linkage closes the deal in terms of reinforcing your thesis statement against any potential attacks. It gives the reasoning behind your interpretation, which (in truth) was all the marker was looking for in the first place.

CONCLUSIONS

It is a very rare marker who has not already thought of a mark (or at least a marking range) for an essay by the time they reach its conclusion.

However, it is important that you don't lose focus, as two or three marks are often won and lost here. The marks of a good conclusion are:

- Maintaining an academic tone. Statements such as 'By exploring the texts in sufficient depth....' Or simply an, 'In summary...'. People lapse in this area a lot because they're simply tired, or thinking about the next essay.
- Consistent thesis. It should be the same thesis you had in the introduction, with a little more sophistication, now that you've had time to explore and link your texts in full.
- Finishing touches. Things that add class to your essay. A quote from the text that sums up your position, a quote from the author that sums up your position, or perhaps a platitude or a proverb that you can call on (best done in more exotic text types). This is often the difference between a 19 and a 20. To get a 19 is to answer the question emphatically. To get a 20 is to answer it emphatically and with style.
- Greater statements on the text's own significance within its context. In other words, how it stands out among other texts from its genre or historical period. How it has a unique place within your area of study/module.

If you can do this in three to four sentences, you're travelling very well.

CONVERSION TO OTHER TEXT TYPES

The majority of work asked of you under exam conditions will come in the form of an extended response (a standard essay). However, it is possible that your skills will be further tested by asking to present your analysis in another text type, or register. A register is effectively a mask for your essay, presenting it in a way that a certain audience will find acceptable. The most common registers are speeches, feature/magazine articles and letters. This is a short guide to converting a body paragraph to each of those.

The one thing worth tampering extensively with is the introduction. Introduction is the mood-setter, the platform, and establishes your writing style for the rest of your response.

Feature article

A feature article's sole purpose is to be read for its own sake, so it can sell itself. That is, the substance doesn't really compare to the actual attractiveness of the article's ability to hold attention. If a feature article can hold somebody's attention, the odds are that they're going to buy whatever publication it's in. However, the fact that substance in real feature articles is often questionable does not excuse you, the English student, from compromising your analysis or linkage in any way, shape or form.

Good feature articles are found in the Good Weekend section of the Sydney Morning Herald and the Weekend Magazine section of The Australian. Crappier but perfectly applicable examples can be found in Woman's Day, Who Weekly, New Idea, Ralph, FHM, Alpha and GQ.

The staple parts of a feature article are:

- Tone – usually delivered in a commentary style. Tone can be conversational, informative (in a documentary style) or even narrative (an example of a narrative FA would be a historical article or a recount given in an interview). You are trying to develop a bond between yourself and your audience. If you don't compel the audience to keep reading you will have difficulty getting them to digest the more important parts of your analysis. Your hardest task, assuming you have enough material memorized, is to give the impression this is being written by a journalist

and not an academic. It is absolutely vital that you maintain this tone throughout your piece.

- Sentence structure – shorter, more concise and more readable. Action verbs are recommended. A way to do this is to imagine you are writing for a peer and not a teacher.
- Rhetorical questions – ‘would Shakespeare agree with the interpretations of his work today?’. Essentially, questions that don’t need answers. Fantastic for filling up space and staying in character. They make ideal reference sentences.
- Emotive language - in an attempt to steer the emotions of the audience – ‘This brings me to Peter Brook’s gut-wrenching portrayal of King Lear’s insanity.’
- Raise your own profile as a journalist – ‘This journalist found themselves enraptured by Goneril and Regan’s dialogue with their father, to the point of squirming in my seat at their sheer insolence.’ Possibly include an ‘interview’ with ‘a source close to the author’ or even the author themselves. Dialogue used imaginatively is an excellent way to score creativity points in feature articles. Stuff such as “‘I really hope the sense of catharsis hit home,’ said the director.”

Speeches

Similar to a feature article in that your first priority is to present your material in a non-boring way. You will always be given a VERY specific target audience – say, ‘a conference of English teachers’ or ‘the Polonius Appreciation Society’.

- Simplified sentences are much more important in a speech, even written in an essay booklet. You wouldn’t use a 40 word sentence in a real life conversation, so don’t use one here.
- Relatively informal tone. Even an imaginary audience can get bored. Use colloquialisms, abbreviations (like doesn’t, isn’t, c’mon etc.), and especially...
- Jokes. Easy, fun and they score points in speeches like you wouldn’t believe. Puns are easy, as is sarcasm and observational humour. ‘It would seem I was born to appreciate Shakespeare, growing up in a small hamlet

outside the city'...Can also be used to demonstrate your knowledge of the text.

- Personalise yourself. Some good lines here:

'Thank you, Mr. Treasurer, for those fine words of welcome.'

'It has commonly been held that...'

'I wouldn't normally say this, but...'

'This reminds me of the time when...'

'Thank you. Drinks and nibbles are in the foyer.'

- Speak in the second person – this establishes to the marker that you have kept the audience front and centre.

'Who among you didn't wince as Hamlet evoked the imagery of Greek mythology as he conformed to an Aristotelian reading?'

'You will realise, after what I am about to tell you...'

'Brothers in Polonius, I thank you for your words of welcome.'

Et cetera. Your task is to hold the audience's attention while you pick apart your text.

- Keep the audience's desires in mind – If you're talking to a conference of teachers, make sure you refer to the syllabus in your speech, for instance. You are selected as a guest speaker to cater to your audience's interests. Don't disappoint them now.

- Platitudes – sweeping statements that aren't necessarily taken as fact, but sound great anyway. Effectively meaningless, but add much to your speech's authenticity. 'Shakespeare has been the bedrock of our children's literacy, the stepping stone to a lifelong appreciation of the written word.' – you get the idea.

Letters

The focus of a letter is not so much to cater to your audience's interests, but to push your own in a way that they are likely to receive well. The nature of a letter, however, means that the letter itself can change dramatically depending on who the audience actually is. This is much more pronounced than in a feature article or a speech.

- First person perspective is needed, always. The only exception is if you are not writing on your own behalf and instead speak for a group, business or organisation.

- You must ALWAYS consider your audience as you phrase your letter. If you're writing to a board of directors, a formal tone is desirable. If you're writing to a sibling, obviously certain conventions don't need to be included. This is the most important part of letter writing – no text type is more affected by the anticipated audience. Your responsibility is to make sure it is obvious who it is being written for.

An example:

‘The way Dumbledore refers to his imagery and dwells on it kinda reminds me of Mum.’ – a sibling as the audience

‘Dumbledore’s evocative and persistent use of imagery is a strategy that I believe could be implemented into a marketing campaign for our product.’ – a board of directors as the audience.

Letters are most effectively done when topic sentences and references address what your target audience would find interesting or useful. For instance, in a question about a corporate sponsorship of Macbeth:

‘The Marxist themes in Macbeth would make it unwise for Macquarie Bank to sponsor this production. I hope that in light of this analysis, you would find these misgivings to be valid.’

...would be an excellent topic sentence.

It is easier to get away with not rephrasing your contextualisation and linkage as long as your topic sentence and reference are effectively done. In fact, you have a little more leeway here because it is understood by markers how difficult it is to change one’s tone on the fly to an audience that could be, frankly, anyone.