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General Writing Guidelines

What constitutes an academic essay?

An academic essay should make a convincing argument, and present interesting, thorough and accurate research. These goals should be contained within an elegant presentation. Write for the reader’s information and pleasure.

The planning stage

Writing is a reflection of thinking, and so you must think about the material at issue before you write anything. Write down a list of points relevant to your ideas. As well as the central points you wish to argue, these may include the steps that link your argument and the evidence and examples you intend to use to support your case. Organise your thoughts into an outline. Your essay should be roughly organised into three parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.

When writing

Interrogate your own work as you go along. Does the sentence or paragraph that you have just written make the point that you intend? What is its purpose? Does it flow logically from the text that precedes it, and into that which follows? If its import is not consistent with your outline, you may wish to move it, rework it, or eliminate it entirely. Back up all your statements, claims, and arguments with evidence. An essay is not a set of unrelated opinions but an argument sustained with evidence drawn from research and observation.
**Essay Evaluation and Assessment**

The following points represent the basic criteria by which your essay will be assessed. These are not in order of priority; all are important.

**Content relevant to topic**

Make your essay relevant to issues that have been introduced in lectures, discussions, and readings. Demonstrate that you have thoroughly reflected upon the matters that are central to the subject you are studying, as well as upon the particular topic of your essay. It is not sufficient simply to recite material gleaned from your classes. A good essay will interpret class materials and apply them creatively to the subject at hand.

As long as you properly support your case, you should not be afraid to introduce a counter argument that challenges the assumptions made in readings or lectures, or that disagrees with their conclusions.

**Logic and structure**

Your essay should have an introductory section that establishes the problem or area of inquiry that you are going to address, and maps out the approach you intend to take in your argument. The body of your paper should expand upon, support, and illustrate the matters outlined in your introduction. Each component of your essay should contribute logically to the whole. A conclusion is essential so that you do not abruptly abandon the reader in mid-argument. Try reading your essay out loud. Does it make sense?

**Argument**

An academic essay should link opinion (a thesis statement or position) to evidence and examples, in an effort to demonstrate the author’s position. After reading an essay, the reader should be persuaded by the evidence it presents and the power of its
argument that the case it makes is plausible and convincing.

Research

For most essays you should read widely. The wider your sources, the more sophisticated and informed your argument is likely to be. At the same time, your work should not be simply a pastiche of other people’s writing. Absorb your reading thoroughly, but select from it judiciously.

Remember that your sources are authored texts, offering particular perspectives upon their subjects according to particular agendas. You should try to demonstrate an awareness of this in the way you deploy them in your work. How does what you have read relate to your argument?

Evidence

Each paragraph should have a controlling idea that is supported by evidence and examples. You may draw your evidence from material introduced in class or from material that you have found elsewhere. Make sure that the transitions between your paragraphs are logical and fluent.

Expression

Proper grammar, spelling and use of punctuation are essential if you wish to communicate effectively with your reader. Carefully follow the Specific Writing Guidelines set out in the following pages. Word choice is also important in determining the tone of your essay. Avoid using slang or forms used in texting.

Layout

Scrupulously follow the specifications set out in Format (see p.9).
How to get the grade you want

How to get a Fail

This is easy. Write the essay in a single draft the night before it is due, with little or no forethought. Have no argument. Introduce no evidence. Lift ideas from a secondary source without acknowledgement. Write an essay that is significantly under-length. Use such poor grammar and spelling that it is impossible to decipher your case. Get your facts wrong. Do not annotate properly, and fail to provide a bibliography. Hand write illegibly. Accrue so many late penalties that you cannot possibly pass.

How to get a Pass

Do none of the above. Answer the question, using evidence to back up your case.

How to get a Credit

Demonstrate that you have given the topic some thought and have gone to some trouble to read around the issue. Pay attention to your expression and punctuation. Make sure your argument unfolds logically and grammatically. Use carefully observed examples to support your case. Make sure you follow presentation guidelines.

How to get a Distinction

Demonstrate that you recognise that you are dealing with a complex and possibly contradictory subject. Construct a case that is carefully and creatively crafted. Research widely. Show that you have properly digested the sources you have consulted, not just cribbed from them. Be scrupulous with the details of your observations. Demonstrate a genuine interest in your subject, and introduce some original thought into your case. Hand in your work on time.
How to get a High Distinction

Start with everything required for a Distinction, and then be more creative. Originality and confident, literate writing are the keys to achievement at this level (and indeed, powerful ideas can only be served properly by strong writing). Good writing demonstrates a passion for its subject and a commitment to the issues it addresses. Research needs to be competent and wide-ranging, but at the heart of really excellent work there is always, foremost, the quality of curiosity. If you are not genuinely intrigued by your subject, you will never come up with original and creative insights. If you want to aim for High Distinctions, cultivate a curious mind.
Specific Writing Guidelines

The following pages refer to style of presentation, editorial style, and some aspects of grammatical construction. Conventions of editorial style and expression may sometimes seem arbitrary; they are not. Aimed at economy, consistency, and attractiveness, they attend to the reader’s convenience and facilitate the swift, accurate exchange of ideas. There is no incompatibility between a creative, inventive argument and clear presentation and expression. Bear in mind that your tutors and lecturers read several hundred essays each year. Papers that are hard to read for whatever reason—for example, poor presentation or confused grammatical structure—will receive lower grades than they would otherwise deserve. The following rules can be quickly learned and are widely accepted, though they may depart from customs in other universities, other manuals of style, and various publishers’ recommendations. They should, however, be an adequate guide for papers submitted in many departments in the School of Humanities, including English and Drama.

Presentation

Format

Print (or type) on one side of the page only, using a 12-point font. Double-space throughout, use A4 paper, and provide margins of four centimetres on the left-hand side of the page and three centimetres on the right-hand side for comments. Indent the beginnings of paragraphs. Number pages consecutively throughout, including the bibliography. Before submitting your paper, attach a departmental cover sheet, and staple at the top left-hand corner. Please do not place essays in plastic envelopes. Always keep a hard copy of the final draft of your paper.
Proofreading and correcting

Before you hand in your essay, meticulously proofread a printed draft of your paper for spelling, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and accuracy of quotations and notes. Remember that spell-check programmes will recognise only misspellings; it cannot help you if you type, say, “causal” for “casual”. Having made corrections, reprint the relevant sections. Minor last-minute corrections can be written in ink above the line.

Where to submit your paper

Deposit Screen and Media papers in the assignment boxes in the main Humanities stairwell outside Humanities Rm 202. After Hours chute is in the Humanities Courtyard, outside Rm 133, unless requested to do otherwise by your instructor. Please note that these boxes are cleared at 4:00 pm. Do not fax your essay. Do not submit it by e-mail unless requested to do so by your instructor.

Quotations

Quote accurately

Reproduce the exact wording, spelling, interior capitalisation and punctuation of the original source. All quotations must be followed by a footnote/endnote or parenthetical notation (details given below, in Citation).

Short quotations

If you quote a word or phrase, enclose it in quotation marks and take care to integrate it with the sense of your own prose:

The Method proposed “a codifiable discipline, a teachable tradition, for acting”.¹
Long quotations

Separate from your text any passage of five lines or more. Indent the entire passage one centimetre from the left margin and one centimetre from the right margin. Omit quotation marks at the beginning and end of the passage, since the typography indicates that you are quoting. If the indented quote refers to other published material, quotation marks should remain the same (as shown below). If you quote two or more paragraphs one after the other, double-indent the first line of each paragraph. If you quote a single paragraph or part of one, do not double-indent any lines.

For example:

As Robert Vogel has commented,

Basically, of course, at the top in all of the companies there was a pull between New York and Hollywood in the respect that the New York people felt that the Hollywood people made fine pictures, but spent so much money doing it that the company couldn’t make a profit. And the folks in Hollywood said, “These fellows in New York are bankers and know nothing about making movies”. And they were both right. But the pull between the two worked to the advantage of everybody. The pendulum would swing a little one way or the other and then find the middle.\(^2\)

The physical separation of the personnel in New York and Hollywood mirrored the distance between the opposing forces that determined the characteristics of the industry’s products.

and

In the 1930s, professions were treated according to the following rubric:
All of the professions should be presented fairly in motion pictures.

There should be no dialogue or scenes indicating that all, or a majority of the members of any professional group, are unethical, immoral, given to criminal activities, and the like.

Where a given member of any profession is to be a heavy or unsympathetic character, this should be off-set by showing upright members of the same profession condemning the unethical acts or conduct of the heavy or unsympathetic character.

Where a member of any profession is guilty of criminal conduct, there should be proper legal punishment for such criminal conduct – such conduct to be shown or indicated clearly.\(^3\)

This policy was designed to protect the industry from hostile action on the part of any professional body that could prove dangerous to its interests.

**Floating quotations**

The relationship between an unattached, floating quotation and the text around it is often mystifying. Make each short quotation part of your own sentence. Do not, however, insert a long quotation in the middle of one of your own sentences, since the sentence will break in half before and after the quotation. Introduce all longer quotations, as in the examples above in ‘Long quotations’.

*Not* Some critics have turned to cognitive science in trying to understand the dynamics of viewing. “Any theory of the spectator’s activity must rest upon a general theory of perception and cognition”.\(^4\)

*but* Some critics have turned to cognitive science
in trying to understand the dynamics of viewing. According to David Bordwell, "any theory of the spectator’s activity must rest upon a general theory of perception and cognition".  

**Final punctuation**

English usage dictates that commas and full stops *follow* closing quotation marks. American usage, on the other hand, dictates that commas and full stops *precede* closing quotation marks. Either approach is acceptable provided it is used consistently.

**Omission**

Never omit material from a quotation if the omission changes the meaning or tone of the quotation. If you wish to omit words within a quotation, indicate the omission by inserting three full stops with spaces before the first and after the third. Do not use full stops to indicate omission at the beginning or end of your quotation. **For example:**

The Method proposed “a codifiable discipline ... for acting”.  

**Interpolation**

If you substitute a word—name for pronoun, for example—or insert a comment in mid-quotation, enclose it in square brackets. Bracketed insertions are often awkward, so use them sparingly. **For example:**

Jason Joy articulated his position in a letter in late 1931:

I am quite concerned about [complaints received from the New York Censor Board] although I cannot say I am exactly surprised. The list of sex pictures we made up while you and the General [Hays] were here showed conclusively that we were in for trouble because of the *number* of such pictures."
Underlining or italicising quoted words for emphasis

If you do so, say so explicitly in brackets—[my italics] or [emphasis added]—after the passage or phrase in question.

For example:

Joe Breen wrote confidentially to a colleague:

As I view it, we can be “free, sovereign and independent”, and tell everybody to go to hell, and make all the pictures we want, with Chinese, German, French (or anybody else) characterised in every way possible. On the other hand, if we want to continue to maintain our very lucrative foreign fields, we shall have to be, possibly, less free and sovereign – and less independent [emphasis added].

Citation

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the use of another’s ideas or words as if they were one’s own. Plagiarism constitutes academic dishonesty, and is taken very seriously by the University. The penalties for plagiarism may include zero marks for the relevant piece of work, a grade of fail for the whole topic, or referral to the Vice-Chancellor.

The Flinders University Policy for Student Enrolment Load Assessment and Progress (p. 20) states:

Plagiarism consists of using another person's words or ideas as if they were one’s own. It may occur as a result of ignorance and/or inexperience about the correct way to acknowledge and reference authors. It may also occur as a deliberate misuse of the work of others with the intent to deceive. It can take the
following forms:

- Presenting substantial extracts from books, articles, theses, other published or unpublished works (such as working papers, seminar and conference papers, internal reports, computer software, lecture notes or tapes, numerical calculations and data) and other students’ work, without clearly indicating the origin of those extracts with quotation marks and reference such as footnotes.

- Using very close paraphrasing of sentences or whole paragraphs without due acknowledgement in the form of reference to the original work.

- Quoting directly from a source and failing to insert quotation marks around the quoted passages. In such cases it is not adequate merely to acknowledge the source.

- Arranging for someone else to undertake all or part of a piece of work and presenting that work as one’s own.

- Submitting another student’s work, whether or not it has been previously submitted by that student.

- Two or more students separately submitting the same piece of work on which they have collaborated, unless the lecturer in charge has indicated that this procedure is acceptable for the specific piece of work in question.

When you borrow an idea, do one of two things. **Either** express it in language that is thoroughly your own and acknowledge the borrowing with a note, or indicate the exact extent of your debt to the actual words of your source—whether a single word, a phrase, or a passage—by enclosing it in quotation marks and
acknowledging your debt with a note. (Extended passages require block quotation rather than quotation marks; see ‘Long Quotations’ on p. 11).

You may use a footnote/endnote to refer to a general indebtedness as well as a particular one:

\[1\] In this paper I draw extensively upon David Bordwell’s *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Methuen, 1985). Individual citations cannot indicate fully my reliance on Professor Bordwell’s commentary.

However, note that in a case like this individual debts to specific pages *must also be cited separately*.

Ignorance is no excuse when it comes to plagiarism. If in doubt, acknowledge the source. If doubt remains, ask your tutor about satisfactory procedure.

**Record-keeping**

Make sure that you have kept sufficiently complete records to enable you to identify your sources. It is frustrating to discover at midnight, as you print a paper due at 9 am, that you did not jot down the details of a book that you have already returned to the library.

**Required notation**

Give the source of every instance of borrowing, whether from a primary document, a literary text or a secondary work. Each new act of borrowing, even from a source already cited, requires acknowledgement. The tradition of scholarship depends upon scrupulous acknowledgement of sources. Your reader needs to be able to assess the credibility of the sources you are relying upon in making your argument. (Is it an anonymous internet chat line? *TV Week? Quarterly Review of Film, Radio and Television?* Personal interview with a film director?) It may be necessary to verify the information you have cited. Sometimes a fact or opinion that you
have unearthed may have value to the reader beyond the immediate context of your paper, provided there is a way to follow it up.

**Two alternative systems of notation**

There are two sorts of notes: **footnotes/endnotes** and **parenthetical notes**. Footnotes/endnotes have the advantage that they allow you to include more information than do parenthetical notes, and they may be preferred in some Humanities subjects. Parenthetical notes are commonly used in the sciences and social sciences. Your tutor may advise you which system you should use. Otherwise, **be sure to use one system consistently**.

**Footnotes/endnotes**

A footnote is a numbered note separated from the body of your text and placed at the bottom of the page where the reference occurs. It gives complete information about your source. If that source is published, a footnote includes author, full title, editor and translator (if any), place of publication, publisher, date and page number, as shown below in ‘Sample Notes’. You may also occasionally wish to use a footnote to add an aside to your text.

Endnotes contain the same information as do footnotes, but instead of being placed at the foot of the page where the reference occurs they are gathered together on a page headed “Notes” that follows the main text of your essay but precedes your bibliography. Most word-processing software will give you the choice of using footnotes or endnotes, and they are equally acceptable.

Footnotes/endnotes are not included in the required word length of essays in Screen and Media.

**Numbering footnotes/endnotes in your text**

Number footnotes/endnotes consecutively throughout your text.
The footnote/endnote number goes after an item to be acknowledged or annotated and after any punctuation following that item. Generally, place these numbers at natural breaks in your text—usually at the ends of sentences—in order to keep them unobtrusive.

*Not* German and Italian audiences complained that the musical soundtracks were “too American” for their taste.

*but* German and Italian audiences complained that the musical soundtracks were “too American” for their taste.

**Sample footnotes/endnotes**

**Book**


Notes follow a who—what—where—when pattern. This is the standard full footnote citation, which you must use for your first reference to a book. In notes, use the author’s first name followed by their surname. Take information for a note from the title page. Add a colon to separate the main title from the subtitle, if necessary. Italicise the title of the book, and give the place of publication, name of the publisher, and the publication date, according to the format and punctuation of the example above. Relevant page numbers must always be given at the end of a note, p. for a single page and pp. for a group of pages.

For subsequent references, use just the surname of the author, and the page number:

2. Maltby, p. 129

Never underline or italicise the author’s name. If you are using two works by the same author, make it clear which one you are
referring to by citing its short form:


**Essay in an edited collection**


It is essential that you cite the author of the essay first, as it is their work you are citing, not the work of the editor. Put the title of the essay in quotation marks, and follow this with the full citation of the book, following the pattern shown in the example above. Cite the name of the author and **not the editor** in subsequent references (Eckert, p. 63).

**Article in a journal or newspaper**


As above, put the title of the article in quotation marks and italicise the title of the journal. The number **44** is the volume of the periodical; the date tells when the volume was published.

**Article in a magazine**


**Film**

4 *Sunday Too Far Away*, movie picture, South Australian Film Corporation, Adelaide. Distributed by Rainbow Products Ltd, Sydney, and starring Jack Thompson, Reg Lye and Max Cullen.
Television and radio programs

1 What are we going to do with the money? Television program, SBS Television, Sydney, 8 August 2008.

2 The search for meaning, radio program, ABC Radio, Sydney, 24 March 1998.

Games

4 Dr Brain thinking games, CD-ROM, Knowledge Adventure Inc., Torrance, California, 1998.

If you are able to add further details to this reference, include the developers and place their name before the game title, as well as the system it was developed for (e.g. Nintendo, or XBOX).

Electronic material


Web document


Journal article on the web

Source quoted at second hand


A quotation is assumed to come at first hand from the source cited. If it is actually at second hand, indicate that fact by referring to both the original and intermediate sources.

Unpublished archival document

6 Sam Morris, letter to Jack Warner, 12 May 1936, JLW correspondence, folder 8, box 59, Warner Bros. Archive, Department of Special Collections, Doheny Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

Interview

3 F Trent, interview with the author, 2 January 2009.

Beginning with the author (if known), work your way from the most specific information to the most general. If your note is adequate, it should be possible for other researchers to go directly to the document you cite, no matter how obscure the source.

For examples of other instances of standard notation, consult a standard guide (see *Some Useful Writing Aids*, p. 34).

Parenthetical notes

Parenthetical notation is also known as the author-date system, or Harvard system, of notation. It can constitute an alternative to footnoting/endnoting, particularly in the sciences and social sciences, as mentioned previously. When an author makes reference to a secondary source, he or she identifies it by giving, in parentheses, the author’s name and the year of publication of the work. In Screen and Media essays, it is imperative that you give the page number(s) of your reference; your reader cannot be expected to trawl through volumes of material in search of the passage to which your refer. The reader can then turn to a list of
“Works Cited”, which follows the body of the essay, for full publication details.

For example:

Universal Pictures ran at a deficit for much of the 1930s (Gomery, 1986, p. 148).

Douglas Gomery (1986, pp. 26-50) discusses the industrial structure of Paramount in some detail.

“Works Cited” are listed alphabetically by surname, and take the following form:

**Works Cited**

**Edited collection**


**Book**


**Journal**


Note that page numbers are provided for essays in edited collections and articles. Note also that, in the titles of essays and articles, only the first word and any words that normally bear capitals are capitalised.

For further information on parenthetical notes, consult one of the works listed under *Some Useful Writing Aids*, p. 34.
Bibliography

In Screen and Media we require every essay to include a bibliography. This should contain all the secondary sources you have consulted in the writing of your paper, whether or not you have cited them in the course of your discussion. List works alphabetically according to the last name of the author.

If you have used parenthetical notes, you will need to provide a bibliography giving all the sources in your “Works Cited” list, plus other works you have consulted. The punctuation and arrangement of entries used in your “Works Cited” list and your bibliography should be the same.

The sample bibliographical entries listed below demonstrate the forms to be used by students using the footnote/endnote system of notation. These entries differ from the form of the footnotes/endnotes themselves mostly in the way their punctuation is organised. Note that surnames are given first, since they determine the order in which the works are listed. Provide page numbers for journal articles and essays in edited collections.

In cases where a reference is required for a popular magazine that you have surveyed over several issues but not cited a particular article include the title of the magazine in italics, the month, year and page no., and repeat the month, year and page no., for each magazine viewed.

Sample bibliographical entries

Multiple issues of a magazine or newspaper


Book


Journal


Edited collection


Filmography

In Screen and Media essays it may be appropriate to include a filmography at the end of your essay, following the bibliography. This comprises an alphabetical or chronological list of films that you have viewed or consulted specifically for the purpose of writing your paper. Do not include every movie you can think of that is relevant to your topic.

At a minimum, a filmography should include the film’s full title and the year in which it was released. A filmography may also include other information, but the nature of that information will depend upon what is most relevant to your topic. For example, if your essay is about formative influences upon a particular director (or lighting director or sound designer), it may be useful to give the title, date and director (or lighting director or sound designer) of each film you cite. On the other hand, if your essay is about postcolonial cinemas, it may be useful to give the title, date and country of origin of the films, or possibly the country of origin and the director. If you are writing about the Hollywood studio system, it might make more sense to give the title, date and studio of origin of the films you cite. Try to decide what information will best shed light upon the argument you are making in your paper. You must, however, be consistent. Do not supply certain kinds of information for one movie and different kinds of information for another.
If your filmography is in chronological order (useful for some historical topics), put the year of release first, followed by the film title in italics. Then enclose any other information in parentheses.


If your filmography is in alphabetical order, put the film title first, in italics. Enclose all other information in parentheses, beginning with the year of release.

*Sunday Too Far Away* (1975, South Australian Film Corporation, Adelaide. Distributed by Rainbow Products Ltd, Sydney, and starring Jack Thompson, Reg Lye and Max Cullen).

It is all right for a filmography to contain a single film. If, however, your essay is about that film (the production history of *Intolerance*, for example), do not create a filmography simply in order to cite it. We can assume that you have watched the movie that you are principally discussing, and relevant details such as date and director should emerge during the course of your paper.

**Programs Cited or Filmography**

Television programmes may be included in filmographies, using the same general guidelines as apply to films. If you are only citing television programmes, you may wish to head your list “Programmes Cited” instead of “Filmography”.

*What are we going to do with the money?* (8 August 2008, SBS Television, Sydney).

2008, *What are we going to do with the money?* (8 August, SBS Television, Sydney).
Miscellaneous remarks

Use the active voice

In the active voice, the subject of the sentence acts. In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence is acted upon. In each of the following examples, the subject of the sentence is underlined.

**Active:**
- The boy kicked the ball.
- The author wrote the article.

**Passive:**
- The ball was kicked by the boy.
- The article was written by the author.

Active constructions are more dynamic and less wordy than passive constructions, which are rarely valuable. Many students show a great fondness for passive constructions such as “it can be seen that …” Try to eliminate these from your vocabulary.

The first person

In Screen and Media there is no prohibition on writing in the first person, and we would prefer that you use I rather than the writer. Avoid writing in my opinion or I think, since we can assume that your assignment puts forward your point of view.

Spelling

Use a dictionary. If you are word-processing, also use a spell-checker. There is no excuse whatsoever for inaccurate spelling at university level, and a slapdash approach to spelling will downgrade the quality of your work, annoy your reader and cost you marks.
Commas

Avoid the misuse of commas.

**Do not use commas to run together whole sentences**

Use a conjunction, a full stop or a semi-colon.

*Not*  The auditorium was constructed on three levels, this meant that all the members of the audience were relatively close to the screen.

*but*  The auditorium was constructed on three levels, which meant that all the members of the audience were relatively close to the screen.

*or*  The auditorium was constructed on three levels. This meant that all the members of the audience were relatively close to the screen.

*or*  The auditorium was constructed on three levels; this meant that all the members of the audience were relatively close to the screen.

**Set off appositives with commas on both sides**

Appositives are qualifying phrases or clauses. In the examples below the appositives are in italics. Notice that one comma would not be correct in either case.

Joe Breen, the inaugural head of the Production Code Administration, was famous for his abrasive manner.

Mike Walsh, author of several articles on early Australian cinema, was one of the conference delegates.

**Use commas to separate items in a simple series**

Do not use semi-colons in a simple series.
We will be studying *Battleship Potemkin*, *Strike*, *October* and *Earth*.

**Sentence fragments**

Use whole sentences, not sentence fragments. Sentence fragments are often used in advertising copy, but they should not be used in academic writing.

*Not* Several themes emerged throughout the course of the film. One of these being that words are sometimes the least effective way of communicating our emotions.

*Nor* The pace of the first half of the movie was relatively slow. While the second half unfolded at a frantic pace.

**The possessive case**

Always use apostrophes in possessives.

Jim’s office

James’ office

The ladies’ costumes

The women’s protests

The authors’ names

There is a useful trick that you can use to determine the correct position of the apostrophe in the possessive form. First invert the phrase (“the office of Jim”, “the office of James”, “the costumes of the ladies”, “the protests of the women”, “the names of the authors”). Then add an apostrophe and s after the last word in the phrase, except where it already ends in s, in which case just add an apostrophe. Hey presto, you now have the correct possessive
form of the word. This might sound complicated, but it is actually easy to learn and it is a very reliable rule of thumb.

The only exceptions occur in pronouns:

- it
- its
- him
- his
- her
- hers
- them
- their
- our
- ours

Please note especially the possessive form of *it*, as in “the audience made *its* opinion clear”. The confusion of *its* and *it’s* (see ‘Contractions’, below) is a common error that is guaranteed to irritate any educated reader.

**Contractions**

Apostrophes are also used in contractions, in which words or phrases are shortened by the omission of one or more letters.

- did not → didn’t
- cannot → can’t
- it is → it’s

Normally you should avoid using contractions in essays. Use full forms.

**Plurals**

Do not use apostrophes in plurals.

- cinema → cinemas
Cinemas were constructed along main transport routes.

Audiences were greeted by uniformed ushers.

There are several areas of disagreement among early film historians.

Life-threatening fires were not uncommon.

Movie palaces were built in the larger cities.

Morse Code consists of dots and dashes in coded combinations.

Other punctuation

Consult a standard handbook, particularly for correct usage of colons and semi-colons. See Some Useful Writing Aids p. 34.

Usage

Familiarise yourself with some of the common rules of usage, with reference to some of the books listed in Some Useful Writing Aids. Such handbooks are likely to be kept in the reference section of most libraries. Among the most frequent problems are confusion of “infer” and “imply”, “affect” and “effect”, and the qualification of a condition that is unqualifiable (not “rather unique”).
Authors’ names

When you first cite an author (or film director or actor) use their full name (“According to Nick Prescott, …”). In subsequent citations you can use their surname (“As Prescott further demonstrates …”).

Subheadings

Sometimes the use of subheadings is appropriate, especially in research reports. In most essays, however, it is more impressive to forge connections between the various parts of your argument using the expressive power of your writing.

Italics or quotation marks?

Italicise foreign words that have not entered English (Verfremdungseffekt, film noir). Also italicise titles of plays, movies, published books, periodicals, pamphlets and long poems. Enclose in quotation marks titles of chapters and sections of books, short stories, articles, essays, songs, short poems and unpublished works such as dissertations. Merely capitalise untitled parts of a specific work: for example, Erhart's Introduction, Bordwell's Chapter Four.

Numbers

If you have few numbers in your text, spell out one- and two-digit numbers and use numerals for others. If you have several numbers in a series or many throughout your paper, use numerals. Spell out a number when it is the first word in a sentence; with large numbers you can avoid awkwardness by rewording the sentence. Do not spell out page numbers, chapter numbers, line numbers or dates. In notes use numerals throughout.

Dates: 150 B.C. but A.D. 1575.

4 July 1986 or July 1986

31
1930s,

19th century

Latin abbreviations

Avoid these in the text of your paper, although they may be useful in footnotes or endnotes where space is at a premium. If you use abbreviations, be sure you know their meanings. They include *i.e.* for *that is*, and *e.g.* for *for example*. Use of *etc.* often suggests a writer's failure to think through a problem or to provide needed particulars.

Tense

When you discuss a movie, book or other work outside its historical or biographical context, keep consistently to the present tense. Although Eisenstein has been dead for some decades, we still refer to his writings in the present tense.

For example:

As Eisenstein *says* in *Film Form*

*The Idle Class* *opens* with a train pulling into a station

Emphasis

Good writing demonstrates a range of emphasis. One way to vary emphasis is to mingle shorter and longer sentences. Two sorts of writing frequently encountered in student essays make emphasis impossible to achieve: firstly, many very short paragraphs each composed of one or two sentences; secondly, long paragraphs each composed of long and tangled sentences. Avoid both these perils.
Logical terms

Critical prose naturally makes distinctions. One result is the necessary use of words like “however”, “nevertheless”, and “therefore”—words which must make logical sense in context. Avoid monotony, firstly by omitting them where possible, secondly by varying the words themselves (see a dictionary for synonyms, a thesaurus for related words), and thirdly by varying their places in sentences.

Gratuitousness

Avoid it.

Not As the well-known American filmmaker, Orson Welles, shows in his excellent film Citizen Kane

but As Orson Welles shows in Citizen Kane

Capitalisation

Do not capitalise at whim. Capitalisation is used for proper nouns (names), the initial word of a sentence, and in titles.

Not Eisenstein was acutely aware of the Politics of Form.

nor The audience suddenly becomes aware of Heavenly Voices.
Some useful writing aids

We have only been able to deal with the most commonly encountered matters of editorial and grammatical style in this booklet. Every student would benefit from owning a more comprehensive guide. When you find yourself in a quandary regarding proper citation of newspaper articles, song lyrics, government reports and so on, it is very handy to have an authoritative text to which you can turn. The following guides are widely accepted:


The editorial forms and conventions used in these different systems may differ slightly, but the important thing is to use a recognised system and stick with it consistently.