The most common problem with student essays is that they are constructed in a back to front manner. They often begin with an explanation and summary of what other authors have written on the subject. The original thought contributed by the student often comes after this. The order of these elements should be reversed. The reader is only interested in what others have said in relation to what you are saying. Remember, author is part of the word, “authority.” You are the authority on the issue addressed in your essay. It is your original thought on the issue that readers are most interested in.

How to approach an essay assignment or question - When you are given a question to respond to in essay form, the first thing you do is read the assigned texts. Then ask yourself, what do I think of this work? Then, what do I think of the essay assignment/question. What is my opinion of this issue, body of work, phenomenon, etc.? It is your input we want; think of authorship as expression of authority. You’ve done the reading; the question is somehow reflective of that body of work; how can you creatively address the question given the information you have gathered (reading, research, screenings, etc.)?

The purpose of an essay is not to address the question given but to address your opinion and position on the issues raised by the question. For instance, a question about “live” TV is open to a wide range of interpretations (ie. aesthetic, economic, generic, etc.). You decide which issue to take up. Do not take them all on. You decide what you think about the chosen issue. You then do some research, look into what others write about the issue. Find evidence for your position. Find opinions that contradict your position; use these as “straw men.” Your position is your thesis.

Use of background reading The reading you do should be used as evidence and support for your argument. You are not supposed to recount what others say before you have introduced the issue and your position on the issue. While some background may be necessary, or some positioning required, you should get to your position relatively quickly (within the first page of a seven-page essay). What you think should be clear in your thesis statement. When constructing a thesis statement, try to include an “action word” as the verb. Avoid using the verb, “to be” or any of its forms. Example of a thesis statement: So-called reality television programs, like “Big Brother” and “Survivor,” exploit popularly held beliefs about human behaviour and emphasise these themes through the use of observational camera techniques.

Writing process: Decide what your position is, what your thesis will be. Outline your essay. Write a draft. Underline your thesis statement. Make sure your thesis is fresh in the mind of the reader at all times. You may need to reiterate it three or four times throughout the work. Check that each paragraph has a topic sentence and that each paragraph builds from its topic sentence. Check that the complete essay matches the outline you began with. If it does not match, figure out what to do, how to shift things, what to add or delete so that it makes sense. Rewrite your introduction. Rewrite your conclusion. Proofread the entire essay. Leave it for a day or two. Pick it up again and see if you have new ideas to include or revise. To proof for spelling, read the paper backwards, word by word, and your eye will catch typos and spelling errors. This is the minimum process. Many authors revise several times before an article goes to press.
Referencing and citation – why do we do it?

We reference material and ideas sourced from the work of others for several reasons. First of all it is required by custom and, in some cases, even by law, to give credit where it is due. Like the “credits” at the end of a film, the references and citations indicate who is responsible for the different elements that have been brought together to make the essay a whole. In addition to this, we reference and cite to distinguish ourselves as authors of our original work. The reader needs to know which ideas are your original contributions. The best way to do this is to indicate what is not yours (it should be considerably less than what is yours). Finally, we reference and cite so that readers who are interested in the subject can do further reading, or can verify your interpretation of the evidence.

Annotations and Abbreviations in Marking

rep = repetitious (you’ve used the same word twice in a sentence or in sequential sentences; a practice to avoid)

# or # agreement or # agr. = this means your noun and verb do not agree in number; you have mismatched a plural and a singular (the soundtrack were very loud; there is two reasons why…) I often underline the words that do not agree

tense = you have shifted verb tense in the middle of a thought

frag = sentence fragment; the sentence is missing a verb and thus is only a phrase and not truly a sentence

w/c = word choice; you haven’t used the word correctly or you have chosen a word that is not the best for the contextual meaning that is already implied in your work.

Awk = awkward sentence construction or syntax

Titles of TV shows are not italicised; they are put in quotation marks “Buffy”
Titles of films are either italicised or underlined; not both and not in quotes