**TLC PODCASTS: Academic writing - a few general principles**

An essay is your written consideration of and answer to a question. For the vast majority of questions, though, there is no “right” or “wrong” answer. This hand-out accompanies Tuesday’s podcast on the nature of an essay and academic writing. In a good essay, the writer takes a position and proposes an argument to justify the position. When you write critically, you

* explain your understanding or interpretation of an issue
* take a clear position, with respect to a specific issue
* support your position with sound evidence
* compare, contrast, and evaluate others’ views and indicate whether you agree with these views or challenge them
* investigate and evaluate others’ positions and claims, questioning their evidence, and provide evidence to support your evaluation
* draw conclusions and recognise the implications of your conclusions
* acknowledge what you are *not* able to account for or explain
* propose recommendations or suggested actions

**An argument is not a “fight”…**

Making an argument means that you make a claim; you give a justification for that claim; and you provide evidence to support it. In other words, you say what it is you think, what your view is. Then, you explain why one might hold such a view – why it is reasonable to hold that view. Finally, you give some evidence as to how you know this.

**“being critical” is not saying how bad something is…**

Being critical is not saying negative things about everything. A critical approach to learning and study has to do with constantly questioning, taking nothing for granted, thinking and developing your own views independently, and weighing the available evidence to support these views.

**and “discussing” does not mean “writing everything I know about x”.**

In this context, when you are asked to discuss, you are asked to present a written exposition of an argument. This means considering various sides of an issue or by considering both positive and negative aspects, making a reasoned analysis based on evidence, and arriving at a conclusion. “Discuss” does not mean “describe”.

**What’s in it for you?**

* Writing essays helps you develop important personal and professional skills. Practicing writing teaches you how to select and engage with specialist texts; organise, synthesise, analyse, and evaluate material from different sources; explain issues, theories, and debates clearly and succinctly; develop a central idea and sustain your argument from beginning to end; and use evidence and examples effectively.
* Writing allows you to figure out what you think! You come to understand new ideas and information best when you try to use them to make a point. When you write critically, you actively test ideas for yourself, which is quite different from discovering ideas or committing things to memory.
* When you write, you can then share your ideas with a reader. This allows for dialogue, debate, and feedback, which are at the heart of learning. In this way writing helps you refine your ideas and, well, improve your writing!

**Use your time wisely**

Develop a daily writing habit, even if it’s just a paragraph or two. This will help you understand how and when you write best – on paper, using a computer, in the morning, after a walk, etc. Building a daily practice will also help you get “into a writing mode” more easily when you are working toward a deadline. The more practiced you become with putting your ideas down in writing, the easier it will be to take on formal writing assignments