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

In today’s podcast, I’d like to talk about academic writing – specifically the nature of an essay, and how the act of writing is not only is a means to produce a piece of work, but also way to clarify your own understanding of a topic.

**What is an essay?**

A lot of the written work that you’ll be asked to do is in the form of an essay. In a word, an essay is your written consideration of and answer to a question. In most cases, essay questions or topics are set by your professors in a way leaves quite a broad scope for interpretation. This way, within the broad topic that is set, you have an opportunity to delve into some specific aspects of your choice. Of course, this means that there is a fair amount of work to be done in analysing the question itself (this is the topic for tomorrow’s podcast!).

Something important to realise about this “answer” to a question is that there is no right answer or wrong answer. Rather, a “good” essay is one where the writer takes a position and proposes an argument to justify that position. This means that the writer identifies and addresses a particular issue or problem, and offers his own interpretation that is based in his reading and thinking. Good essays also feature an evaluation of others’ work – where writers explain whether they agree with or challenge others’ views, and why. Finally, a good essay makes clear which aspects of an issue or problem are addressed, while recognising which aspects that remain unresolved.

So when you are thinking about how to approach essays, remember that there are some

expectations about “critical” writing (or “analytical” or “argumentative” writing). In your essays, some of the things you are expected to do are to

-explain your understanding or interpretation of the issue, supported by some others’ ideas

-take a clear position, with respect to a specific issue – make a claim

-support your claim with sound evidence

-investigate and evaluate others’ claims, question their evidence

-compare, contrast, and evaluate others’ views – and note whether you tend to agree with or to challenge these views

-provide evidence to support your evaluation

-draw conclusions

-recognise the implications of your conclusions,

-propose recommendations or suggested actions.

**An argument is not a “fight”!**

I should point out here though, that an argument, in this sense 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.

If you think back to yesterday’s podcast on reading, you might recall that the author’s claims and evidence are also the elements you are looking for when you read and make notes. One of the advantages of reading texts this way is that it can help you learn how to write this way.

Also, be aware that “being critical” does not mean that you should constantly offer negative critique. 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 independently and developing your own views, and weighing the available evidence to support these views.

By the same token a “discussion” does not mean a “description”. Rather, a “discussion” is the exposition of an argument: a presentation of your point of view on a specific matter, an explanation of why you hold that point of view, and evidence to support that point of view. There are no “perfect” arguments (just as there are no absolute “right” answers). Arguments are necessarily limited in some ways. But some arguments are stronger than others. Developing your critical thinking skills will help you evaluate arguments you encounter in reading or listening to others by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. It will also help you build strong (i.e. convincing) arguments, by selecting sound justification and evidence for your point of view, and presenting them clearly.

Note that presenting what someone else says or thinks is not the same as proposing your own ideas, or your own perspective. In this way DESCRIBING is not the same as DISCUSSING. Of course, some description is necessary in an essay, but writing that it excessively descriptive does not succeed in making an argument. (for more on what DISCUSS means, download Wednesday’s podcast on questioning your essay question)

**Writing is way of thinking**

I’d like to consider one last aspect of academic writing: what’s in it for you?

Writing regularly teaches you how to

-select and engage with academic texts

-synthesise, analyse, and evaluate material from different sources

-explain issues, theories and debates clearly and succinctly

-develop a central idea, and sustain the argument from beginning to end

-use evidence and examples to support your arguments

All of these skills will serve you for your studies and for your professional pursuits.

Writing well is a challenging part of studying. It requires you to explain yourself clearly to your reader. In a conversation, your interlocutor can stop you when they haven’t understood something. But when you are confined to using only words on a page, you are obliged to figure out what you think and why you think so, in advance. Writing is your opportunity to work out just what you think. Indeed, by explaining yourself to others, you come to discover what you think.

While the final version of your essay should present clearly and convincingly your point of view, don’t imagine that you can sit, come up with entire argument, then simply write it down. It is the process of committing your ideas and thoughts to paper (or to the screen) that helps you discover your own views. When you see your own explorations and explanations in black and white, you are better able to evaluate the pros and cons of your argument. You are also able to refine it in order to make it clearer for your reader (and yourself!). In essence, by writing, you discover and shape your own point of view.

Listening in lectures or reading a text are often more passive ways of engaging with ideas, compared to writing. Discovering ideas and theories is an important part of learning, certainly. But you really come to understand them when you try to use them to make a point – this is the benefit of writing. When you write, you are testing the ideas for yourself.

Finally, when you write down what you think, you are able to share it with a reader and enter into a dialogue with your reader for feedback. This is an important part of the process of refining your ideas and improving your writing. This can happen by informally sharing drafts with your peers or tutors, submitting a piece of work for assessment, or posting in a blog.

**Using your time wisely**

One way to develop your writing is to write on a regular basis. Develop a writing habit! Consider scheduling time for daily writing – even if it’s just a paragraph or two. For example, if you don’t have a particular essay or assignment that you are working on, read over a set of past reading notes and write a text that combines, contrasts, or juxtaposes the ideas you’ve found across a set of readings. If you are working on an essay, try to write for 10 or 15 minutes without interruption, focussing on some aspect of your topic. The more at ease you become with writing as a practice, the easier it will be to take on formal writing assignments.

So, the key points from this are that an academic essay should convey a clear point, an argument. This point should be a fairly specific one and it should be justified and supported by evidence. This justification and evidence involves your own observations, which includes your evaluation of the observations and findings of other writers. Writing down how you understand your course material – in your notes, drafts, and essays – is an essential part of clarifying this understanding for yourself and for your readers. Finally, the best way to improve your writing is to practice writing as often as possible!

Today we’ve discussed some of the basic principles of academic writing. Remember that you can always seek writing support from your academic adviser or from TLC’s qualitative study advisers or the Royal Literary Fund Fellow.

We’ll be looking at writing in the rest of this week’s podcasts. Tomorrow, we’ll talk about how to be sure that you understand the essay question to get your research and writing off to a good start. Thanks for tuning in!