

First-Year English and Cultural Studies Handbook

Department of English & Cultural Studies

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This booklet is designed for students in first-year English and Cultural Studies courses at McMaster.
It provides specific advice on the writing and submission of essays.
Please take the time to read through it carefully.

CHECKLIST FOR ESSAY WRITING

Give yourself time to revise your essay using this checklist before you submit it. Pay special attention to any problems your tutor may have identified in your last essay. You are encouraged to consult your tutor, the English writing tutors, or a writing text such as *the Little, Brown Compact Handbook* for further explanation of the terms and concepts mentioned below.

STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

- Are the subject, the approach to it, and the plan of the essay made clear at the beginning?
- Is some clear principle of organization used? Is it carried through? Does it serve to focus the subject?
- Do the paragraphs move logically and clearly from one to the next? Do the first and last sentences of each paragraph do their job in making the connections between paragraphs (but without being unnecessarily repetitive)?
- Are the paragraphs of appropriate length (between 4 lines and 1 page)? Is each paragraph focused on a clear line of argument?
- Does the essay roughly meet, but not exceed, the assigned length?

THESIS STATEMENT

- Is the thesis (the essay's central argument) clearly expressed in a sentence or two in the first paragraph? If read independently of the essay, would the thesis statement still make sense?
- Is the thesis related precisely to the assigned topic and texts?
- Does the thesis present an *argument* about the topic and text? In other words, does the thesis present a position on the question at hand, or is it vague or wishy-washy?

OVERALL RHETORICAL EFFECT

- Does the essay take an authoritative stance? Does it convey enthusiasm for the topic? Does it work at persuading the reader?
- Is the essay reader-friendly? Does it provide adequate contextualizing details, or is the reader expected to fill in gaps in information and argumentation?
- Is the tone engaging, but without being overly casual?

CONTENT AND EVIDENCE

- Is the content of the paper fully developed, i.e., is it detailed and analytical? Does it avoid simply presenting either 1) a plot summary or 2) a "grocery-list" of observed details?
- Does the major point taken up by each of the developmental paragraphs clearly support the main thesis?
- Are the points convincingly supported by textual evidence and argument/explanation?
- Does the essay develop the argument mainly from primary sources (texts, e.g. literature, films, etc)? Or does it rely too heavily and uncritically either on secondary materials (critical books and articles), or on ideas presented in lectures?

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

- Are all of the sentences comprehensible and complete?
- Are sentences varied in form and length? Have you avoided series of similar sentences?
- Are parallel constructions carried through?

QUOTATIONS AND REFERENCING

- Do the chosen quotations effectively support the point they are intended to reinforce?
- Are the quotations appropriate in their length, i.e., are they reduced to the minimum number of words needed to make the point? Are there too many long quotations?
- Are the quotations integrated smoothly into the paper's own sentences and paragraphs, and do they make sense grammatically as well as logically in the context of the essay?
- Is every quotation's format correct?
- Are the quotations properly referenced? Have you attached a Works Cited page and is it accurate in content, format, punctuation, and spelling? (See the *Guide to Documentation* in this handbook, the explanation of MLA-style referencing in *the Little, Brown Compact Handbook* or Joseph F. Trimmer's *A Guide to MLA Documentation* published by Houghton Mifflin.)

GRAMMAR

- Have you avoided sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices?
- Have you relied on the active rather than the passive voice?
- Have you corrected any dangling participles?
- Do verbs agree with their subjects? Do pronouns agree with their antecedents?
- Are verb tenses used correctly and consistently?

WORD CHOICE

- Is there wordiness? Can any words be eliminated?
- Are words used precisely?
- Is there undue repetition?
- Are there awkward or unidiomatic expressions? (i.e., clichés, archaisms, mixed metaphors, hyperbole, overly formal/overly colloquial language)

SPELLING AND PUNCTUATION

- Are there spelling errors? Has the essay been carefully proofread (on paper) after it has been spell-checked on a word processing program?
- Are commas, apostrophes, periods, question marks, exclamation marks, semi-colons, colons, and dashes all used accurately and helpfully? (Look out in particular for problems with the last three items in this list.)

ESSAY FORMAT

The physical formats of your university essays may vary somewhat depending on the discipline and/or the preferences of your professors and tutorial leaders. English papers generally follow the guidelines set by the Modern Languages Association (MLA). Please refer to “MLA Style” in *the Little, Brown Compact Handbook* for more detail. Here are some of the more important rules:

- Leave one-inch margins on the top and bottom and both sides of the text. You want to leave room for commentary. Justify only the left margin.
- Indent the first word of each paragraph five (5) spaces (one tab space) from the left margin.
- Indent set-off quotations ten (10) spaces (two tab spaces) from the left margin. Only indent a quotation if it is longer than four lines. If you indent a quotation, it does not require quotation marks. Single-space the indented quotations.
- Use 12-point font and double-space your text.
- Number pages consecutively in the upper right-hand corner, except for the first page, where the number should appear at the bottom in the middle.
- At the top of the first page of your essay, type your name, your instructor’s name, the course, and the date, on separate lines, double spaced, flush with the left margin. Follow this with the title of your essay, centered. Do not use a separate title page.

ESSAY DOCUMENTATION

The following guidelines, derived from the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, Seventh Edition (2009), describe the appropriate method of documenting sources for essays in first-year English and Cultural Studies courses.

You must acknowledge all borrowed ideas and quotations. If you borrow a word, a phrase, a sentence, or an idea from someone else (in a book, an essay, or a web page) you must say where it comes from. If it is not your own work, you must say so, or it is academic theft. If you do not cite the reference with full bibliographical information, you are guilty of plagiarism and you will be penalized. Therefore (1) keep accurate notes, making sure you know which ideas are yours and which come from other sources; (2) each time you make a new outline, or move from outline to draft, or from draft to draft, keep the references to borrowed ideas and words clear.

Works Cited or Consulted:

At the end of your paper on a separate sheet, prepare a list of Works Cited or Consulted. Arrange the list in alphabetical order by the author’s last name, or, if the author’s name is unknown, by the first word in the title other than *a*, *an*, or *the*. Do not number the entries. Begin each entry at the left margin, but indent the subsequent lines of that same entry one tab space. Double-space within and between the entries. For each book cited or consulted you must include: (1) the author’s name (last name first, then comma, then the first name(s) or initials -- as they are given on the title page -- then a period); (2) the title of the book italicized, followed by a period; (3) the place of publication (the city or town), followed by a colon (:); (4) the name of the publisher, followed by a comma; (5) the year of publication, followed by a period; (6) the publication medium, followed by a period. The publishing information usually appears on the title page of the book or the reverse of the title page. If several cities are given for the publisher, give only the first. Here are some sample entries:

A Book:

Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Modern Library, 1929. Print.

If the book has been republished and you are using the later publication, give the first publication date, followed by a period, and then the publication information of the edition you are consulting:

Eliot, George. *The Mill on the Floss*. 1860. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980. Print.

A Film:

Chicago. Dir. Rob Marshall. With Renée Zellweger, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Richard Gere. Miramax, 2002.

Items in an Anthology: The title of the story or poem should go in quotation marks, directly following the author's name and followed by a period. The period should go inside the quotation mark. The editor of the anthology should come after the anthology's title, introduced by *Ed*. If a book or anthology has more than three authors or editors, list only the first and follow it with *et al*. At the end of the entry, give the inclusive page numbers and the publication medium.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Young Goodman Brown." *Lexington Introduction to Literature*. Ed. Gary Waller, Kathleen McCormick, and Lois Josephs Fowler. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1987. 142-51. Print.

Yeats, William Butler. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." *Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Ed. Alexander W. Allison et al. 3rd ed. shorter. New York: Norton, 1983. 515. Print.

Item in a Collection of Essays:

Humphreys, A. R. "Fielding's Irony: Its Method and Effects." *Fielding: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Ronald Paulson. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962. 12-24. Print.

An Article in a Periodical: You must give (1) the author's name, last name first; (2) the title of the article, in quotation marks; (3) the name of the periodical, italicized; (4) the volume number; (5) the date of publication, in parenthesis and followed by a colon; (6) the pages on which the full article appears, followed by a period; (7) the publication medium.

Mulvihill, James. "The Rebel Angels: Robertson Davies and the Novel of Ideas." *English Studies in Canada* 13 (1987): 182-94. Print.

A Lecture: Give the lecturer's name (last name first), the title of the lecture (or course), the place, and the date:

Savage, Anne. Lecture. English 1C06. McMaster University. 20 October 2009.

Electronic Sources: MLA style recommends that you omit the URL unless it is necessary in finding the source. You should, however, include in your citation all the information you can reasonably obtain, such as: the author or editor of the site; the name of the site, italicized; the version number of the source, if applicable; the name of any institution or sponsor (if unavailable, include the abbreviation **N.p.** for "no publisher given"); the date of electronic publication or update (if unavailable, include the abbreviation **n.d.** for "no date of publication"); the publication medium; and the date you accessed the source.

An Entire Web Site:

Jokinen, Annina, ed. *Luminarium: Anthology of English Literature*. Web. 26 Mar. 2009.

A Book:

Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Boston, 1855. *Google Book Search*. Web. 28 Mar. 2009.

An Article in an Online Scholarly Journal:

When citing from an electronic source that has a print version, include the publication information of the print source (see above), the inclusive page numbers if available (if the page numbers are not available include the abbreviation **n. pag.** for “no pagination given”), the publication medium, and the date you accessed it.

Burgess, Irene. “‘The Wreck of Order’ in Early Modern Women’s Drama.” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 6.3 (2001): 6-24. Web. 19 Aug. 2008.

An Article in a Magazine (online version):

McFarland, Keith. “Myth of the Fearless Entrepreneur.” *Time*. 2 June 2008. Web. 23 Mar. 2009.

An Article in a Newspaper (online version):

Wyatt, Edward. “Electronic Device Stirs Unease at Book Fair.” *New York Times*. 2 June 2008. Web. 22 Mar. 2009.

Citations in the Text:

There is no need for footnotes in this system of documentation. After each quotation or borrowed idea, give the author’s last name and the relevant page number(s) in parentheses. Your reader can then proceed to your list of Works Cited or Consulted and find the necessary publishing information.

Example:

Robertson Davies’s novel has been called “a genuine novel of ideas” (Mulvihill 182).

If you have already given the author’s name in your text and the reference is clear, you may simply put the relevant page number(s) in parenthesis. Here is an example of borrowing a direct quotation:

Thomas Hardy was vitally interested in the social conditions and trends of the late nineteenth century. As Douglas Brown has written, “The tragedy of the exodus of the agriculture workers from the villages and the countryside, and what that tragedy represents, forms one of Hardy’s continual themes” (37).

Here is an example of an indirect reference or paraphrasing:

Thomas Hardy was aware of the changes taking place in the England of his day, and his writings reflect his interest in these changes. As a countryman he was particularly concerned about the migration of the agricultural workers from the countryside into the industrial towns, and Douglas

Brown has argued that this is one of the most significant themes in Hardy's work (37).

If you cite two or more sources by the same author, include a shortened title after the author's name. For example:

Penn emphasized his religious motivation (Kelley, *Pennsylvania* 116).

When a reference to an electronic source includes paragraph numbers rather than page numbers, use the abbreviation **par.** or **pars.** followed by the paragraph number or numbers:

The earliest type of movie censorship came in the form of licensing fees, and in Deer River, Minnesota, "a licensing fee of \$200 was deemed not excessive for a town of 1000" (Ernst, par. 20).

For further information and more complicated examples consult Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (New York: MLA, 2009).

PLAGIARISM

When a university student submits an essay as part of the requirements of an academic course, it is assumed that this essay represents the student's own work. Plagiarism is an inexcusable offence in the academic world, but some students seem uncertain about what in fact constitutes plagiarism.

Complete originality can hardly be expected in an undergraduate essay. It is not easy, for example, to present a fresh, coherent theory about motivation in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to discover new information concerning the campaigns of Napoleon, or to offer a hitherto unconsidered interpretation of a Biblical text. This does not mean, however, that you cannot submit an essay on any of these subjects that legitimately reflects your own thought and work. Thus you can weigh conflicting theories about Hamlet and point out their strong and their weak points; you can emphasize what you consider the most significant aspects of Napoleon's campaigns, and give intelligent reasons for your selection; you can sum up varying interpretations of a Biblical text and reach a judicious conclusion. What you must not do is find a book or article containing some relevant passages on the topic, copy them out, and offer them as if they were your own work.

The rules governing quotations and references are, in fact, very simple. If you discover a passage, a word, or a phrase which strikes you as particularly apt for your chosen topic, it is perfectly proper to reproduce it in an essay **so long as it is copied accurately word for word, is enclosed in quotation marks, and is documented by a citation of author's last name and the page reference all in parenthesis. The book must also be entered in the list of Works Cited and Consulted at the end of the essay.** (For the proper forms for citation, see the preceding section on "Essay Documentation.")

But you may decide that, although an article or chapter is extremely relevant to your study, and strongly influences you in the preparation of your essay, there is no particular passage that offers itself as quotable material. In this case you may paraphrase (or, more frequently, summarize) the argument or opinion that it presents. As the actual words of the original are not reproduced, no quotation marks will be used, but a citation, explaining the source of the material and the extent of its influence on your own argument, is as essential as in the case of direct quotation. It is wise in such cases to introduce into the sentence a phrase like "as Paul Hunter has noted..." in order to make the attribution unambiguous.

To offer unoriginal work without the above-mentioned references and acknowledgments is to plagiarize.

It is also plagiarism if you submit the same essay for credit in two different courses. Plagiarism is an act of academic dishonesty. **All students should consult McMaster's Academic Integrity Policy, available online at <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students-AcademicStudies/AcademicIntegrity.pdf> or ask your tutor if you do not have access to the internet.**

ESSAY POLICIES

Assigned Topics:

Unless a prior arrangement has been made with your TA, you will be penalized for not writing on an assigned topic.

Late Essays:

1. All essays are due at the beginning of your tutorial on the date assigned.
2. The mark for any essay handed in after this time (including any time after the tutorial has begun) will be decreased by one grade per day late. If your essay is worth a B+, but was handed in a day late, it will be given a B; two days, a B-; three days, a C+; and so on up to seven days.
3. No essay will be accepted by your tutor after seven days without a medical reason. (Saturdays and Sundays count as working days.) You will receive an F (0) for that assignment.
4. You must hand in your essay to your tutor or instructor in person. We do not accept essays that have been slipped under the door of an office.
5. If you have a legitimate reason why you cannot meet an essay deadline, you must talk to your TA before the essay is due. If you have to miss class for an extended period of time, or you are having difficulties of a personal or medical nature, please contact an academic advisor in your faculty office. They will notify your instructors and help you make any arrangements for missed or late assignments.

ESSAY GRADING CRITERIA

The quality of ideas -- the argument's clarity, persuasiveness, and insightfulness -- is the most important factor in determining each essay grade. The quality of writing is also important. Grades generally reflect the following criteria:

A+, A, A-: Excellent. The essay thoughtfully develops an interesting thesis or shows a sophisticated understanding of concepts under study. The student is in command of the topic and shows some originality and enthusiasm in discussing it. The essay is well organized, convincingly argued, and clearly expressed -- a pleasure to read. It is virtually free of errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation, and uses the conventions of scholarly documentation correctly.

B+, B, B-: Very Good to Good. A competent, accurate treatment of its topic but not as sophisticated as essays in the A range. The essay is well written and has a clear thesis or shows a good grasp of concepts under study. Essays at the bottom of this range may not have fully digested the material, and may lean uncritically on secondary sources. The organization is good and the sentences are all comprehensible. There are few errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation. The essay follows standard conventions of scholarly documentation.

C+, C, C-: Good to Fair. A fairly basic or superficial treatment of the question or a fuzzy comprehension of concepts under study. The thesis is unclear, or trivial, or undeveloped. Much of the

essay is summary or paraphrase, with only occasional analytical comment. There may be inaccuracies; essays at the bottom of this range may rely exclusively on secondary sources. The essay is disjointed; some sentences may be convoluted and incomprehensible. There may be mistakes in grammar, spelling and punctuation, as well as carelessness about scholarly documentation.

D+, D, D-: Poor. Has serious inaccuracies or inconsistencies. The student has some grasp of the topic, but not much. Where sources are cited, they tend to be misused or misinterpreted. The student may express opinions, but does not support them with evidence or argument. The essay lacks coherence, is unclear, and has many errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation.

F: Failure/Below University Standards. A serious misunderstanding or inability to grasp basic concepts. The essay is disorganized, obscure, full of grammatical errors, and difficult to understand. (This grade is also given for plagiarism.)

Conversion Table Conversion Table

Grade	Equivalent Grade Point	Equivalent Percentages
A+	12	90-100
A	11	85-89
A-	10	80-84
B+	9	77-79
B	8	73-76
B-	7	70-72
C+	6	67-69
C	5	63-66
C-	4	60-62
D+	3	57-59
D	2	53-56
D-	1	50-52
F	0	0-49 -- Failure

Notes: (1) Students will be penalized for not writing on the assigned topic. (2) University English grades are for most students considerably lower than high-school grades. (3) Second-class standing (B- or higher) is usually required for admission to an English program.

WHO TO CONTACT WITH PROBLEMS

You should, in the first instance, bring any problems you have relating to your first-year English or Cultural Studies course to your assigned tutor. If the problem cannot be resolved at this level, you should contact your course instructor or the Chair of the First-Year English and Cultural Studies Committee; for details please see: <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~english/counsellors.html>

ENGLISH AND CULTURAL STUDIES AT MCMASTER

McMaster's Department of English & Cultural Studies has a large and diverse faculty offering students a wide range of courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The following is a brief introduction to our undergraduate programs.

B.A. Programs in English and Cultural Studies:

Our Honours and B.A. programs are so designed that you can explore English literature and Cultural Studies in greater depth and detail as you progress from level to level, and, in most cases, in progressively smaller classes. We offer a range of courses at Level 1, all of which will help you to become a better writer and will teach you the conventions of writing literary and cultural criticism. English 1A03 (Literature in English: Shorter Genres) and 1AA3 (Literature in English: Longer Genres) provide an introduction to the major literary forms and to some significant approaches to interpretation, while English 1C06 (A History of English Literature) offers a survey of English literature from its origins to the present. English 1CS3 (Studying Culture) will introduce you to the contemporary discipline of Cultural Studies. Our Level II and III courses foster a broad understanding of major movements and ideas in Cultural Studies and English literary history. Some of these courses offer focused investigations of particular authors, periods, or national literatures - of Shakespeare, for example, or Canadian literature - while others explore such genres as the novel or investigate the nature of modern countercultures or gender theory. At Level IV, our Honours students take true seminars, in each of which a group of students works closely with a faculty member. These seminars, designed to encourage in-depth study and open dialogue, distinguish our Honours programs from most other programs at McMaster and from English programs at many other universities. A wide selection of seminars is offered every year. Recent topics have included Women as Public Intellectuals, Canadian Short Stories, The Witchcraft Controversy, European Romanticism, and The "Oprah Effect."

The Five Program Options:

- *Honours BA in English:* This four-year program includes a full complement of English courses (usually 18 units a year), but leaves you ample room for electives or a minor. Honours students take 9 units of level IV seminars in their final year.
- *Combined Honours BA in English and Another Subject:* Honours English can be combined with most Humanities and Social Sciences programs. Such combinations as English and History and English and French are popular, but students have also fruitfully combined English and Gerontology, English and Women's Studies, and English and Computer Science. As a rule, you will take 12 units of each subject each year. Combined Honours students take 6 units of level IV seminars in their final year.
- *Combined Honours BA in Cultural Studies and Critical Theory and Another Subject:* This new four-year program examines a wide range of cultural forms, including those that have been typically overlooked in universities (e.g. television, popular film and fiction, and practices of everyday life) while paying attention to a number of theoretical issues (e.g. gender, sexuality, race, class, subjectivity, ideology, representation). CSCT can be combined with other disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences. You will normally take 12 units of CSCT and 12 units of the other subject each year. Combined Honours students take 6 units of level IV seminars in their final year.

- *BA in English:* A three-year degree, the BA has lower entrance requirements than have the Honours programs. Students in this program usually take 12 to 18 units of English a year. Although admission cannot be guaranteed, BA students who do well in Levels II or III may apply to enter the Honours program.
- *Minor in English:* Any student who has 24 units of English at the end of a four-year program may claim a Minor in English. Units toward a Minor are usually accumulated by taking those English courses designated as electives. Students in other programs who have taken 6 units of Level 1 English and wish to take English area courses may, however, apply to the departmental counselor for permission.

Career Opportunities:

Most students pursue a degree in English or Cultural Studies because they find that they have an interest in literature and culture, a growing facility with language, and a strong aptitude for critical thinking. Many of our graduates go on to professions that demand a proficiency in analyzing texts and in communicating ideas, such as publishing, law, journalism, library science and, in particular, teaching. As a basis for either a teaching career or graduate research, our honours programs have a proven academic reputation. But many English and Cultural Studies graduates also enter the business world -- marketing, public relations, advertising, and employee relations all demand clear, persuasive language -- and some even train to become doctors and bond traders.

University degrees in the humanities are designed to foster intellectual growth and develop comprehensive faculties of reasoning and argument. They are not meant to provide narrow vocational training. Your degree is an important asset, but it is only part of your ongoing education; most graduates take further training either before they enter the job market or in the workplace itself. Your eventual choice of career will depend, in part, on the skills and knowledge you acquire at university, but also on your personality, interests and the needs of the marketplace.

The Career Planning and Employment Centre in Gilmour Hall 110 has a wealth of information on careers for English & Cultural Studies graduates and provides guidance to help you plan your future. Their website is <http://careers.mcmaster.ca/>

If you would like to know more about our programs, please feel free to contact our Undergraduate Counselors; for details, please see: <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~english/counsellors.html>