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7. Write on baby! Way to go!

If your school used to let you have several bites at the cherry

Some schools allow students first to go and talk to a teacher about what to put in an essay; then to hand in a draft essay and get comments back; and finally to submit the essay proper. At university you are expected simply to prepare, write, and put the essay in – and that's it.

Preparing to write

Writing up is simply the last stage of the assignment process. Always be sure you know what you think and wish to say before you start to write. "I cannot write" often really means "I have not read and thought enough and do not know what I really want to say". It's common to prepare several different outlines before you are ready to write.

It's time to do the essay

You must write out your essay properly in sentences and never do it in note form. Write it on a computer if you can; it is easy to move sections around, spell-check it, and print it up. At the printing stage, it is a good idea to set wide margins on both sides of the paper as this encourages the marker to make more comments and these are valuable.

If you have any diagrams to put in, it is usually acceptable to draw these neatly using a ruler and pen. There are excellent drawing programs for computers (CAD – computer assisted design) but they take quite some time to get to grips with.

If you do not have access to a computer (rare), then typing up your essay is the next best way. Try not to put in a handwritten assignment, which looks poor, and can earn you lower marks if the assessor gets fed up trying to read it. If you must write by hand, use black or dark blue ink, and remember to leave wide margins to encourage comments. However you write it, you should draw any diagrams and figures carefully using a ruler, and if they are complex use more than one colour. It's best not to pick red, because the marker may wish to use red to correct or add to the diagram and you never want to annoy a marker.

ESSAY TIPS – A LIST OF THINGS TO AVOID

“Before I answer this question I shall...”

Never begin with this phrase; it ensures you are sidetracked at once; it automatically causes you to answer a question that you were not asked; and it is likely to convince the marker that you are not all that bright. Disasterville!

Lyk, dude, it's so-o-o kewl n gr8 yeah? – any 1 no y? Ezpz m8! Geddit?

Right! Now I have your attention, texting-spelling, gangsta rap, slang and colloquialisms have no place in written essays. Note, however, that in oral presentations a judicious use of slang or the vernacular can sometimes be effective as long as it is in very small doses.

Humour

Few people have the gift of being able to write amusingly and their efforts to entertain are sometimes painful to read. Unless you've ever been asked who writes your material or else your name is Woody Allen or Stephen Fry you'd better avoid trying to be funny.

☺ Sign in an English butcher's shop: “Buy our sausages – you'll never get better.” ☺

Abbreviations in essays – take care!

You must avoid all short forms like “can't”, “won't” and “isn't” and write the words out in full. Written English is a bit different from spoken English. (I deliberately broke several rules in this book in order to make it more accessible – don't do as I do, do as I say!)

You should be aware that the first time you use an acronym you should spell it out, for example “The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)...”; after that you can use the acronym alone without further explanation.

Using brackets

These (when used often) tend to give (at least to some people) a feeling of choppiness (or breathlessness) and slow down the communication of ideas (or anything else) and suggest (to the critical) that you have (probably) not thought through the issue. As you can see, it's best just to avoid it.

Using oxymorons (if you're a pedant peasant it should really be oxymora)

These are phrases that contradict themselves in some way, like “pretty ugly”, “original copy” or “small crowd” (and some might think “military intelligence” or “business ethics”). While not exactly wrong, they can annoy fussy people and one of these might be marking your essay. Think carefully about the words you use.

The shotgun technique

This consists of throwing in everything you know about the issue, in the hope that a few pellets will strike home, rather than answering the question. In this case it is untrue that nothing succeeds like excess. To combat it you can practise making outline answers; spend longer on organising your approach; stick to your prepared outline; keep reading the question as you write; and sprinkle a few words from it in your answer now and then.



Getting side-tracked

This means moving away from the central question asked and delving into interesting but scarcely relevant areas. An assessor is likely to conclude that you possess a scatty mind and have a less than fully logical approach. Hello bad mark! Use the same solution as for the shotgun technique.

Trying to impress by deliberate complexity

Technical jargon is usually essential at university and makes for precision in communication. Your analysis may well be complex but the expression of it should be simple. You should not deliberately set out to write long, complex sentences or use less obvious words on the grounds that you feel this is suitable for university-level work. Too often arcane words are used in invidious fashion, possibly erroneously, your meaning becomes blurred, and you can easily forestall the attainment of the exalted mark you so richly deserve; so it is judicious to eschew the non-obligatory mode of adopting obscure vocabulary in an ineffectual endeavour to obfuscate or inveigle someone into perceiving that you are a luminary. Get the message?

End of excerpt from Chapter 7; on to Chapter 8.

8. They're going to examine me, but I feel fine



You should try to revise regularly throughout the term – ignore the smart guy who says that if it wasn't for the last minute, nothing would ever get done. Regular revision can help prevent the exam blues; I hope by now you set aside some time every day to read over a few of your notes. Half an hour is often enough, but it depends on your personality, your memory, your enthusiasm and so on. A good revision technique is to read your notes and the skeleton answers you made earlier, and also to devise new outlines to questions from old exam papers, tutorials, the textbook, or the study guide. You will probably have a short break between the end of teaching and the beginning of exams. Use this time wisely – it is your last chance for revision so you should make the most of it.

GETTING READY FOR THE EXAM

Avoiding emotional upsets

There may be fifty ways to leave your lover but this is a rotten time to choose to break off with your boyfriend or girlfriend. Wait until after the exams to end it all. Nothing should disturb your mental equilibrium, and emotional conflicts are high on the list of things that can pull down the standard of your work.



Make a new plan, man!

Try making a plan for the best use of your time. Allocate roughly equal time for each subject, but make sure you give a bit more to your weakest area. This can improve your overall performance, because it is generally easier to raise your mark from 40 to 50 per cent than from 80 to 90 per cent.

Fragment the day, Ray

Break your study day into chunks. Remember to study for your optimal length of time, whatever that is, and then take a short break between revision sessions.

Those notes must be read, Fred

For most people it is better to do this topic by topic. You could also go through your textbook and read the bits you highlighted, as well as practise drawing diagrams (if applicable to your subject).

Combat that stress, Bess

You already know various relaxation techniques and should have decided on the one you like best; it's a good idea to do it regularly (it works better with practice). Use your preferred one daily in the lead up to the exams. Be aware also that steady revision throughout the term together with a good revision programme in the two or three weeks before the exams help you to keep your stress levels under control.

No new work, Kirk

It is a waste of your precious time going to the library at this stage looking for new information or reading up new stuff. You're now in pure revision time!

You tell me yours, I'll tell you mine

It is good to work with your study-buddy or group for part of each day if possible, either discussing topics or going through questions and brainstorming answers. Such sessions help to break up the tedium of sitting reading notes all day and are an aid to memory. Play games for variety. With a topic, you might all sit and read it up from your individual notes for say five to ten minutes, then one person explains it to the others, and they then question, criticise and comment. You reinforce knowledge and might get some new and interesting insights, as you are working from different notes. Two topics and a short break often seem to work well.

You can select a question and discuss a possible answer as a group. Alternatively, each person could draft an outline answer to the same question for five minutes and you then compare them by passing these outlines around the group. A really good composite answer can often be devised from these efforts.

The night before the exam

It is best to leave the night before an examination free. The little bit you will manage to stuff in your memory can easily be smaller than the amount you inadvertently knock out. Last minute cramming often means that none shall sleep and you don't need that. It is best to relax quietly and go to bed around your usual time, or maybe just a little bit later to encourage you to drop off.

I HATE EXAMS BUT I'VE GOT TO DO THEM

Getting there must not be hard to do

A few days before the exam, check that the date, time and room you put in your diary are all correct so you do not inadvertently get there half an hour late or even on the wrong day. The night before, make sure you set your alarm so you wake up in good time and avoid hassles and worries. It's best not to try to study before you leave. Eat something and get there in good time. If you go in by bus, you might catch the one earlier than usual to be sure. If you have an ancient car that won't always start, consider getting a lift or choosing a more reliable means of transport. When you get there, try not to stand around discussing possible questions and their answers with friends. This process, like revising the night before, can be counter-productive. It can also start you worrying which you definitely do not need. Use Figure 9 to help you check that you are prepared for the day of the exam.

End of excerpt from Chapter 8; on to Chapter 10.

10. Role-playing and drama queens – presentation Matters



LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING: DEVELOPING MORE SKILLS THAT WILL STAND YOU IN GOOD STEAD

As part of your university career, you should seriously consider trying to do one or more subjects that involve role-playing. These are often located in the university's commerce or business faculty, and many universities now allow you to take such courses whatever your main study area. Check the university handbook or ask in the department or faculty office what's available in your institution.

☺ Our speaker does not intend to bore you with a long speech...he can ☺
easily do it with a short one.

Role-playing presentations can be immense fun and are often a superior version of primary school show-and-tell; but now it's for grown-ups. You are moving from the page to the stage; putting it another way, you are no longer writing an essay but engaging in course encounters of the word kind. Programmes that include role-play require a bit more effort because

because you have to work on both the content and the presentation for top marks but they're worth it and moreover they are enjoyable.

What's in it for me? Good question! You will develop the skill to

- Research a practical project, which is dear to the heart of those hiring in business and government.
- Develop your own individual approach to a problem.
- Improve your communication abilities.
- Enhance your self-confidence and learn to think on your feet.
- Organise complex material in new ways and explain them to an audience.
- Work out creative methods of using props in making a presentation.
- Put together a visually attractive and persuasive final report.
- Sell yourself, and persuade people to your point of view.

In short, role-playing sessions develop your vocational skills, look brilliant on your CV, provide you with an interesting topic to raise in a job interview, and can really give you the edge. If you get the opportunity for a role-playing course, go for it!

Don't reinvent the wheel – learn from the others

It is tempting not to go to the presentations of your fellow students, when you still have heaps of work to do, are struggling to define your topic clearly, and searching for elusive information. Resist this temptation! You should attend everybody else's sessions and watch, listen and learn from their strengths and weaknesses. Consider carefully whatever criticisms and suggestions the staff member makes to them and see how you can incorporate this into the delivery you are yet to make. More marks for you!

Unlike tutorials, if you have a choice it is better to do your presentation late in the term because by then you will have learned a lot from simply watching the others.

DEALING WITH ESSENTIALS: THE BUCK STARTS HERE

Timing

Make sure you know how long you have got in which to make your presentation. There will almost certainly be time taken out at the end for questions, discussion, and suggestions. Typically, an hour

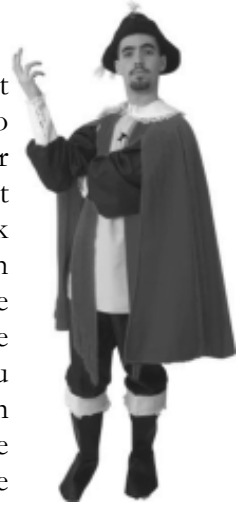
have 20 minutes for your actual presentation, but in a half-hour session you would be lucky to get more than 12 minutes or so.

Get there early on the day

Try to be there in good time so you can check out the room, make sure all the equipment you need is there, is working, and you know how to handle it. You can also lay out any props you will use, and put up any maps, posters, or photographs that you intend to point to. You might want to look at the timetable or check in the departmental office to see if the room will be in use before your session. If this is the case, you may have to set up some wall stuff well in advance.

Dressing the part

You need to dress up in character to get your best performance: it will help you to do better and will also impress the student audience and staff member (better marks!). In most cases men should wear a dark suit and tie with a light-coloured shirt; women a dark business suit or plain blouse and dark skirt, and both need leather shoes – the whole power-dressing game in fact. Women should use make-up and simple jewellery like earrings – it all helps. Of course, if you are going to be a historian acting the part of a Baron who is supposed to persuade King John to accept the Magna Carta, your dress choice is perhaps more limited.



You need to stand up straight during your performance (yep, it's a performance), with your shoulders back, stomach in and chin up – but try to avoid the ultra rigid “soldier on parade” stance; it merely tends to make you look dumb.

Use cards to present your talk

Do not write an essay and read it out – when making a presentation this is a recipe for a low-grade result. Instead, put your notes on cards (which takes care of the problem of what to do with one hand) and glance at them for your next point. Keep your head up and go for maximum eye contact; keep sweeping the room, looking in a person's eyes for a second or two, and make sure you have eventually looked in everybody's eyes at least once. Keep the cards low and do not hold them up in front of your face. It's best not to place them on something, such as a lectern, and then read

from them, as this tends to point the top of your head at the audience and emphasise points you are making.

LET THE TALKING BEGIN

Setting the scene

Start by telling the audience who you are, who they are, why they are here, what you want from them in general terms, and the title of your project. If your instructions do not state who the members of the audience are supposed to be, you decide and tell them anyway. This gets them involved and starts a bit of bonding going. Only when the scene is set should you begin your talk proper.

Starting the presentation

A good way is to pass out your handout. Make sure that your name, the project title, the date, and who the audience is supposed to be are on the front page. And the staff member's name too is a good idea as it makes them feel included rather than ignored. A good logo helps a lot – either design your own or use a computer to import a suitable graphic, perhaps from the Internet. When passing out any material, make sure that if there is a leader of the group in the audience (the managing director of a company, the leader of a delegation, the President of Ruritania etc.), they get the item first – well, after the staff guy anyway (the one who will decide your mark). In your particular course, you might find the staff member is automatically the leader.

☺ Q. How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light-bulb?
A. Only one – but the bulb must really want to change.



Grabbing the audience quickly

Try to grab their attention at once, perhaps by some bold statement (“In the next ten minutes I hope to persuade you to invest 30 million pounds in a laboratory in Doncaster.”) or by drawing their attention to a particularly impressive poster or overhead transparency. A prop can help a lot; e.g. if you plan to produce and market doughnuts you might bring some real ones along for people – hold one up as soon as you can and show it as a “teaser” – and tell them that they can have a bite or two to try at the end. Such things add interest, get the attention of the audience, and earn marks for you.

YES, THEY'RE ALL LOOKING AT YOU!

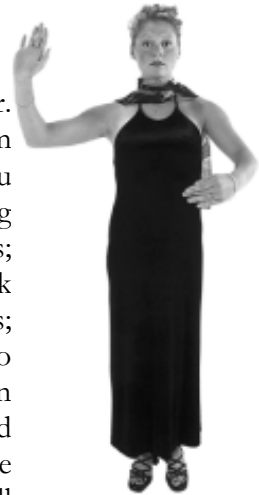
You will be standing out in front. Watch your posture and remember to stand tall and look dominant.

Things to avoid

- Putting one or both hands in your pockets.
- Putting your hands in front of your face and partially obscuring it.
- Leaning on the furniture.
- Keeping your arms hanging permanently by your sides.
- Keeping your hands permanently behind your back.
- Standing with your arms on your hips.
- Clenching your fists.
- Scratching yourself – some people itch when nervous!
- Biting your lips or twisting your hair.
- Brushing specks off your clothes.

What sort of gesture will you make this time?

You need to use gestures to put your points over. What to do with your hands is a perennial problem and it is easy to look silly. As early in the term as you can, start watching speakers on TV, including politicians, game-show presenters and entertainers; notice what they do with their hands and arms. Look for particular gestures that accompany good news; underline a point to be emphasised; attempt to persuade; or try to diminish criticism. You can practise these in front of a mirror, first in silence and then while speaking. After all, the TV people you are learning from already did this! This is a good life skill to possess.



Be aware of the way you use your voice – keep checking as you talk

Refer back to the advice on using your voice in Chapter 6, page 90.

End of excerpt from Chapter 10. Now to the back cover and some reviews of earlier study-guides by the same author.

THE BACK COVER:

Going to University: the Secrets of Success provides the information that you need to get to university, to settle down quickly, and do well there. This book will help to banish fears by explaining how to adapt to the pressures of your new course. You will learn what is expected of you and how to meet these demands. The information in this book will be of constant value during your entire time at university.

Reviews of earlier books:

"How to Succeed as a Student". Four Star Rating: This fabulous guide is a must for students from year 10 on. It addresses a wide range of issues and advice. (Four Star Australian webs targeted to support students and schools)

"How to Succeed as a Student". Excellent book by Kevin Bucknall. (Dr. Donald Simanek, Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania)

"How to Succeed as a Student"Written for students...One of my personal favorites! (Penn State University)

"How to Succeed as a Student" Written by Kevin Bucknall, really interestingtake a look" (Dr Clive Buckley, North East Wales Institute)

This book [*"Studying at University"*] is obviously for someone planning to study or already studying at university. Some of the chapters deal with preparing for university life but the majority will be of interest to every one....this book is easy to read, to the point and easy to dip into." (Sheffield Hallam University.)

Dr. Kevin Bucknall has over 30 years experience in tutoring and university teaching in the UK and Australia.

He is the author of 5 books and 30 articles. He has been a Visiting Associate Member of St. Antony's College, Oxford; a Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics; and a Visiting Fellow at the University of British Columbia.

Exposure Publishing, UK
ISBN 978-1-84685-660-0
RRP £9.99

OTHER REVIEWS

For a good general resource for student entering college, visit *“How to Succeed as a Student”*...Many of the chapters are relevant for college freshmen-to-be anywhere.... (Institute for Learning Technologies, Columbia University)

“Great book written by Kevin B. Bucknall” (Marius Andreiana, (Student – now a Software engineer and Linux/Unix system administrator)

Kevin Bucknall's *“How to Succeed as a Student”* is very helpful for college life.... (GettingReal.com)

“This is a link to a free down loadable study skills book. Some material is specific to the writer’s own institution but it is easy to readespecially good on how to manage life as a student away from home for the first time.” (Dean of Students’ Office, University of East Anglia, UK)

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<http://www.bucknall.homestead.com/>

THOSE WHO HAVE VOLUNTARILY LINKED TO OR RECOMMENDED MY WEB PAGE INCLUDE :

- * Aston University’s “Learning Study Skills”, UK
- * The University of Birmingham, “Guide to Effective Learning”, UK
- * The Carnegie Mellon University, Universal Library
- * The ChemistryCoach.com
- * Dundee University, Scotland
- * The University of East Anglia, UK
- * The Fountain Gateway
- * The Gateway Regional Guidance Department, a “Just for Kids” Benchmark School
- * Leeds University’s Geography Department “Study Skills for Geography Students”, UK
- * The Maricopa Center for Learning & Instruction, New York, USA
- * The University of Pennsylvania, USA
- * The National University of Singapore, Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning.
- * The University of Wellington, Victoria, New Zealand.