Humanities Essays: Why are They Important, and What Makes Good Essays Good?

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An Overview

1. What are essays?

2. Why are essays important?

3. What makes essays challenging?

4. Common advice and concerns regarding essay quality

5. Crucial habits in essay writing

6. Important rhetorical skills for essay writing

What is an essay?

- "a short piece of writing on a particular subject" (Oxford English Dictionary)

- Essays are a relatively 'old' genre of academic writing, dating from the Renaissance (Andrews, 2003).

- The English word derives from the French *essai* ('to attempt'), but modern usage implies a complete, polished piece of writing.

- In humanities and social science essays, knowledge is questioned rather than presented as absolute.

Why are essays important in the humanities and other disciplines?

Essays are the dominant genre required of students in the humanities, and are highly valued in non-humanities disciplines.

British Academic Written English Corpus:

86% of Arts and Humanities assignments are classified as essays.

56% of Social Science assignments are classified as essays.

Why are essays important in the humanities and other disciplines?

- Essays are **flexible and rhetorically** rich; knowledge is **constructed on the page** rather than merely reported through writing.

- *"The essay…is a genre and text-type in which explicitness is a key characteristic….There is little or no suggestiveness or nuancing in the essay: everything is 'above-board'….The essay, then, is the genre par excellence for assessment in the academy"* (Andrews, 2003)

What makes humanities essays challenging?

- Essays are a 'loose' genre, and the idea of the essay varies from discipline to discipline.

- Undergraduate tudents are increasingly exposed to, and required to adopt the writing conventions of, a few disciplines rather than just one.

"Common terminologies may actually refer to different underlying constructs and elements in the writing of different disciplines" (Bruce, 2010).

What makes humanities essays challenging?

Differences between humanities essays and text genres common in other disciplines boil down to different ways of creating knowledge.

'Hard' sciences and social sciences are hypothesis and concept driven, and this seems to lead to common templates for texts.

Humanities disciplines are broadly text-driven, and knowledge is created by (often diverging) interpretation (MacDonald, 1989).

Differences in ways of creating knowledge-different text 'shapes.'

A 'Pure' Science Research Report	A Business Case Study
<u>Title</u>	<u>Title</u>
I. Abstract	I. Executive Summary
II. Introduction	II. Findings
III. Methods and Materials	III. Discussion
IV. Data	IV. Conclusion
V. Results	V. Recommendations
VI. Discussion/Analysis	VI. Implementation
VII. Conclusion	<u>References</u>
<u>References</u>	

Generic labeling of structure

The 'shape' of a humanities essay

Title

[*Perhaps* some non-generic headings related to content, but only in *long* essays]

References

'Shape' varies by discipline, and there is little labeling of structural elements.

Common Essay Advice from Professors

Essays should:

- *Have a clear structure*
- *Have a clear, persuasive argument*
- *Be consistent, with coherent paragraphs*
- *Be written in an academic style*
- *Contain evidence to support claims*
- *Have a clear authorial voice*

"I know a good essay when I see it, but I cannot describe how to write it" (quoted in Lea and Street, 2006).
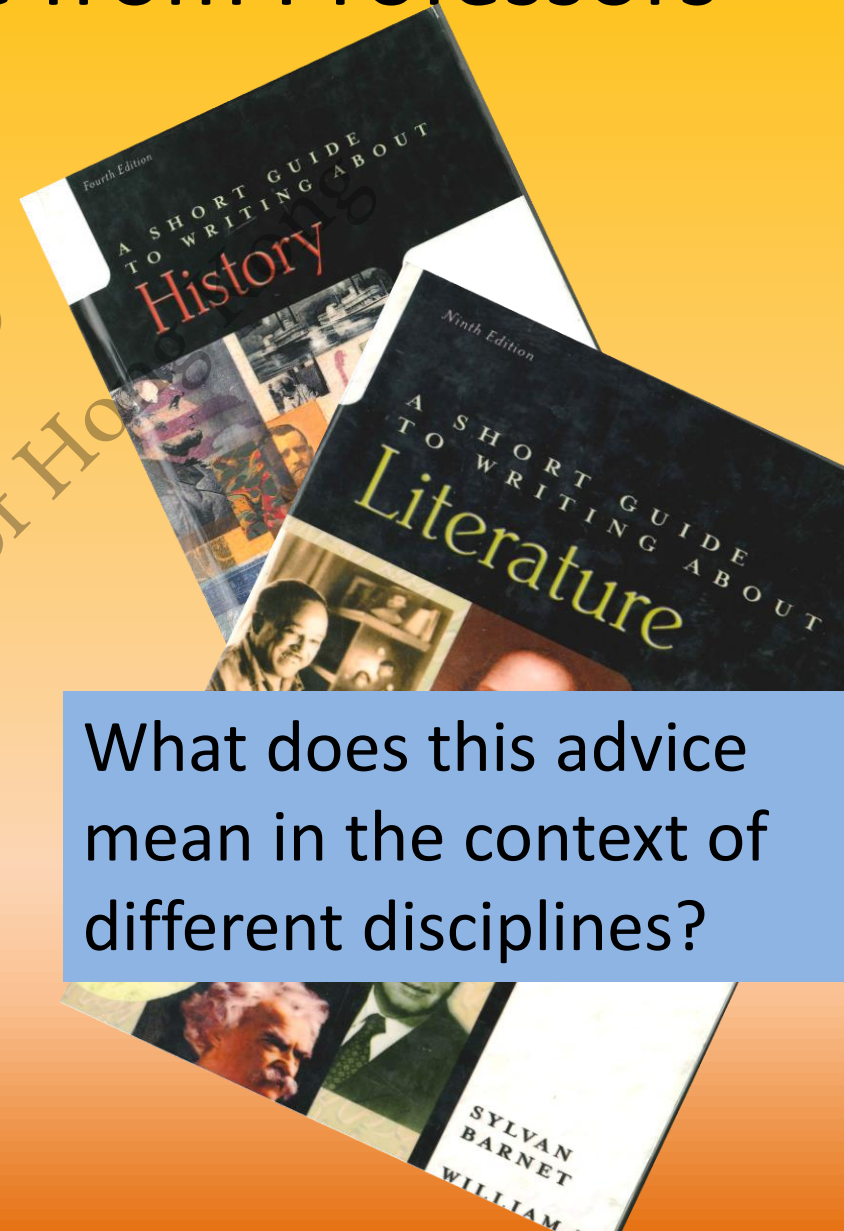
What does this advice mean in the context of different disciplines?

Student Concerns

Students are concerned about:

- Avoiding language errors
- Using "objective," impersonal voice (e.g., no "I")
- Using proper referencing format
- Whether they are following the right model

These are important concerns, but they are surface-level. Students risk missing the forest for the trees if only focusing on these issues.

Are there generic writing skills?

- This is open to debate. Some scholars (e.g., Lea and Street, 2006) doubt the usefulness of treating *skills and text features as generic* across disciplines

- There is, however, broad consensus that good writers across the humanities disciplines share certain *generic writing habits*.

Common Writing Habits of Good Humanities Writers

Good humanities writers typically:

- Find disciplinary sources through **a variety of search methods** (not just Google Scholar, not just soft copies)

- Use elaborate **note taking strategies** (e.g., coding, thematizing and synthesis of information)(Campbell et al, 1998)

- See ways of using **sources of varying reliability** appropriately

- **Plan/outline** their writing

- **Revise** a few times, with the primary focus being on **argument** (not just proofreading) (Campbell et al, 1998; North, 2005)

What writing skills are worth focusing on?

- **Generic rhetorical tools** that are common to many disciplines

- **Specific rhetorical tools** that are key to building knowledge in your discipline

- Both kinds of rhetorical tools often take the shape of **paragraph-sized units of text**

Examples of "Generic" Rhetorical Tools Common in Many Disciplines

1. Essay **introductions** that orient the reader to the topic, state a thesis, and give an overview/foreshadowing of supporting arguments
2. **Extended definitions** of key, contested concepts
3. **Paraphrasing** others' ideas/arguments
4. **Synthesizing** multiple sources into an over-arching idea
5. **Rebuttal**
6. **Inductive paragraphing** (i.e., the main idea is not stated in a topic sentence)
7. **Conclusions** that paraphrase (rather than repeat) main arguments

Examples of Rhetorical Tools That are Relatively Discipline-Specific

1. Building chains of **causality** (History)

2. Identifying and interpreting **textual symbols** that tell about ideas in a culture (Anthropology and Cultural Studies)

3. Suggesting **interpretive themes** in fiction, and supporting these themes with examples from the text (Literature)

4. Marking **time**, as well as themes of **change and continuity** in narrative (History)

5. Highlighting and explaining salient **themes in table data** (Linguistics)

"Where can I find examples of these rhetorical features?"

Closing Advice

1. Focus on more than just **'surface-level' features** (e.g., avoidance of error).

2. **Adopt proven habits**: Find core disciplinary literature, plan your writing, and revise to improve your argument.

3. Sharpen your skills in writing **"generic" rhetorical elements** of an essay (e.g., introductions, rebuttal, conclusions).

4. Look for, and even collect, examples of **key disciplinary rhetorical tools**. Pay attention to commonalities and variations across these examples.