
What We Look for When We Mark Essays

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Today's Plan

- Part One: a frank discussion of what lecturers want and how they actually mark essays.
 - Break
 - Part Two: how I grade essays and how you can improve your essay-writing performance.
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What is an “essay”?

- Type I: out of class assignment
 - Short: 1-4 pages
 - Medium: 5-12 pages
 - Long: 13-50 pages
 - Type II: examination
 - Short: 30 minutes/ 25 marks
 - Long: 60 minutes/ 50 marks
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Essay = a form of information

■ essay

- 1597, "short non-fiction literary composition" (first attested in writings of Francis Bacon, probably in imitation of Montaigne), from M.Fr. *essai* "trial, attempt, essay," from L.L. *exagium* "a weighing, weight," from L. *exigere* "test," from *ex-* "out" + *agere* apparently meaning here "to weigh." The suggestion is of unpolished writing. *Essayist* is from 1609. The more literal verb meaning "to put to proof, test the mettle of" is from 1483; this sense has mostly gone with the divergent spelling *assay* (q.v.).
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“To *essay*” is to put an idea on trial

- You can be a prosecutor or a defense attorney.
 - A real question has to exist: no one has a trial over a simple fact or an obvious point.
 - Something is “at stake” during a trial: why should anyone care about your idea?
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How to Win a Trial

- When you prosecute or defend an idea, you need
 - A strong **claim**
 - Carefully presented **evidence**
 - Awareness of the judge's **requirements**
 - **Credibility**
 - A good **story** (including, suspense, transitions, closure)
 - **Luck** and **personality**.
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Ok: do all profs want something different?

- No, not everyone wants exactly the same thing.
 - Some explain criteria carefully, some do not.
 - When profs talk to each other, they claim to want roughly the same qualities.
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A LAW GUY

- When I grade essays, I look for:
 - - A clear thesis/theme
 - - Logical/persuasive development of that thesis/theme
 - - Internal coherence
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A PHILOSOPHY GUY

- Some lookouters:
 - 1. How correct is the exposition of the views being presented?
 - 2. Is the student going beyond exposition and profiling her own thinking on the topic.
 - 3. How relevant is the entire essay to the specific topic under consideration?
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ANOTHER PHILOSOPHY GUY

I see in the description below the phrase “the progressive development of ideas through the paper”. That’s not a phrase a philosopher would use, probably. We would say ‘an argument.’ Not that non-philosophers don’t make arguments, not that philosophers don’t engage in ‘developmental’ maneuvering that would be hard to cash-out in as geometry-style P’s and C’s – but the difference in emphasis is at least noteworthy. (The difference shouldn’t be taken literally, in other words, but it should be taken as indicative of something.) Philosophers may conceive of themselves as being part of an ‘argument’ culture that is perhaps more narrowly, perhaps more sharply defined than in some other disciplines. This much is certainly right: students taking philosophy classes need to make sure they understand what their professors want when they ask for ‘an argument’. The thing to do is: ask the professor.

A PSYCHOLOGIST

- What I look for is whether the student is able to take various facts and put them together into a coherent argument on the assigned topic.
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A BIOLOGIST

- In my case, I would be looking for
 - (1) critical evaluation of up-to-date information in the literature,
 - (2) synthesis of new insight or idea,
 - (3) ability to defend his/her position, and
 - (4) clarity and logical presentation of thoughts.
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A SOCIOLOGIST

- My two cents: Add “juxtaposing arguments & developing your own view”



AND FINALLY...

- Question: What does an English professor with way too many essays to grade want?

 - Answer: A vacation.
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The break...

How I construct essay questions

What I do as the essay deadline approaches

THIS semester: the “archive”

How I grade

Midterm this semester

Some past papers

The upcoming paper

A teacher's worksheet

■ PURPOSES:

- ❑ I want to balance my emphasis when offering criticisms, suggestions.
 - ❑ I want to explain to students what “works” and what doesn’t work in his/her writing so that s/he can use strengths and fix weaknesses.
 - ❑ I want to make my own process reasonable and efficient
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Personal considerations

- Being with a paper is like being with a person.
 - A person can demonstrate “care” or “carelessness”—and we tend to notice if people care or don’t care for us.
 - Typos and carelessness are more than mere distractions. And plagiarism signifies contempt.
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