

Essay Writing Guide
Department of Social Anthropology
University Of Cambridge
Human, Social & Political Science Tripos

Preparing, writing and presenting supervision essays

These guidelines are intended merely to help and encourage you in your written work. They do not have the authority of the regulations for the schemes of examination that are published in *Statutes and Ordinances* or the *Cambridge University Guide to Courses*, nor of the more particular instructions that may from time to time be issued by the Faculty and Department. Nor are they intended to override a supervisor's conception of what makes for an acceptable supervision essay in his or her subject.

Essay Writing

The 'weekly supervision essay' is the medium in which, in answer to a question from a supervisor, you develop your views about what you have read and heard. It is a medium you should master. But there is no one way of doing so. Different people write in different ways on similar subjects, and different subjects may prompt you to write in different ways.

Essays are answers to questions, eg. the question for your supervision topic provided by your supervisor and accompanied by a list of suggested readings. You should bear in mind that in Social Anthropology the answer to a question is an argument.

In some subjects, for example in regard to some issues in social theory, the arguments might need to be fairly formal. In others, certainly in those in which you are required to marshal evidence and interpret it, they will be less formal. In every piece of written work, however, the object is to say what you want to say as clearly and as persuasively as you can.

It is important, therefore, to be aware of how you write. Do you manage successfully to explain how you are thinking about the matter at hand, why you are thinking about it in the way that you do, why you argue about it in the way that you do, why you reach the conclusions you do, and, if you cannot reach a conclusion, why you cannot?

Questions of writing style that you should bear in mind include the following:

- Are your sentences long and involved, unfolding a thought on paper as its complexities unfold in your mind?
- Or are they always short?
- Or do they vary according to the subject and the kind of point you are trying to make?
- Are you confident about the way in which you use paragraphs?
- And your vocabulary? Is it wide and inventive?

You are fortunate if your answer to the last three of the above questions was 'yes'. If you are unsure, or wish to extend or improve your style or to experiment with new approaches and techniques, the weekly essay, which is not assessed, is the perfect place in which to do so.

You will gain much from thinking about the writing of the authors you read. Whom do you admire? Whom do you find tedious and confusing? Whose styles might you try for yourself,

and whose might you wish to avoid? The way in which some anthropologists write leaves much to be desired. But some write well, and a few quite strikingly so. Distance yourself from the former, concentrate on the latter, think about how they write, and about what aspects of their writing you might like to try for yourself. (Good writing is also to be found in other works that anthropology students often read, ie those of sociologists, philosophers, historians, etc).

Good writing can be good for many reasons. All that is good, however, is good because it conveys what the author wants to convey and holds the reader's attention.

Great writers can be complex, but effective complexity is a difficult art. Merely good writers, which is what most of us can aspire to be, are never less than clear. They begin by commanding the reader's attention to the question or topic at issue, avoid unnecessary jargon, and can often say what they wish to say in reasonably short space.

They also strive to be exact, and where appropriate, precise. Exactness and precision turn on vocabulary as well as syntax. Do not unthinkingly adopt the terms of the authors you read. For some essays, of course, the use of such terms as 'family', 'culture' 'ritual', 'power', or 'resistance' will be what is at issue. But even in these cases, perhaps especially in these cases, you should ask yourself whether the term is the most appropriate and effective.

Good authors are authoritative, but their authority is never absolute. Do not be afraid to paraphrase, translate, reconstruct, even deconstruct. Your style, like your thought, must be your own, and the two are intimately connected. To cultivate and refine them is never easy, but it is also one of the great pleasures of academic work.

Argument

There is no ideal essay. But in Social Anthropology, a good essay will almost always indicate the range of considerations at issue, the position or positions that have been taken on these by others, and a defence of your own. Some will be more conceptual, or theoretical, some more ethnographic, but most will be a mixture of the two. You are free to pursue whatever interpretation and line of argument that you find persuasive.

Your writing is your own expression, and for this reason the active voice is better than the passive voice. In other words: 'I argue' or 'Barth argued that' or 'Malinowski explored the issue of' or 'Parry contends that' or 'Durkheim's concern is' or 'Das shows that' are all preferable to the passive 'It is believed that' or 'It was thought that'. Active phrases like these are also more effective than imprecise and unfocused expressions such as 'Evans Pritchard talks about' or 'Malinowski looks at'. Such phrases as 'It is believed' or 'It was thought' can also make the reader wonder whether you are expressing your own view or someone else's.

Successful essays will engage with their subject. They should of course reveal a grasp of the issue at hand, and the reading you have done. Successful essays will also engage their reader. They will deploy a skilful juxtaposition of good argument and telling quotation or evidence. They work towards a definite conclusion, even if that conclusion identifies an area of still unresolved debate.

A supervision essay is not the final word on a subject. (Indeed most social anthropologists would say that as in philosophy, history and literary criticism, there is no final word on any given topic.) So an essay may end in irony or paradox, or with more questions than it began with. You should regard it as evidence of thought and work in progress, to be revised or extended in discussion and later in private. Prepare for your essay by reading as widely as

you can and considering the implications of your reading for the question you are trying to answer. Beware though of deciding too soon on the argument you will make.

In thinking of how to start writing, which for most people is always the most difficult moment, you should bear in mind the question posed by your supervisor - what are its implications? what is significant about its phrasing? But you may also find it helpful to start from a question that came to you in your reading and refused to go away. If you are unsure of your starting point, say why. If you are unsure about how to end, say why also. This will provide a good basis for discussion. Remember that dogma deters the reader and does not command respect.

Structure and planning

Good writing always has a structure, and many if not all supervisors hold that it is best to make a coherent written essay plan before you write.

Your aim should be to draw the reader in and excite her attention, to make her read to the end. Even if you are averse to writing to a plan, you are unlikely to engage your reader with a disordered stream of allusions, impressions and asides. You will need paragraphs.

Paragraphs usually make a single point. If the point is a complex one, you may need several paragraphs. And these should connect. But do not try to say too much, and be careful to avoid repetition.

The title to which you are asked to write may be general, its potential scope enormous. You will have only a week, sometimes less, to prepare for it and write. And you will usually not be able to write more than two or three thousand words. Good lecturers (lectures are a kind of essay) know that they can at best develop two or three important points in 50 minutes, sometimes, if the point is difficult, only one, and 50 minutes of talk is about 7,000 words. Essays will be more succinct than lectures, but even so, you will probably not be able to do more.

Quotations and evidence

In essays on conceptual and theoretical subjects, your 'evidence' is likely to be texts. In essays on subjects of a more empirical kind, it will be what you take to be the important facts. In neither case can you usually afford unthinkingly to quote at length. Consider three not untypical examples:

Quoting a substantial block of text: There may be a good reason for you to quote a fairly long passage - a long paragraph from Marx or Strathern for example - for a theory essay. If your purpose is to comment on the context in which the author was writing, that is say on what s/he presupposed and whom s/he believed her/himself to be writing to, you might quote only the first sentence, gloss the rest, and perhaps add observations elsewhere in the text on the author's other works. Or you may have reason to quote part of one or two sentences, or not bother to quote at all. If they are necessary at all, quotations of different kinds of different length may suit different purposes.

Quoting ethnography: Although many of the best works of anthropology contain wonderful 'quotable' passages, it is usually not a good idea to include these wholesale in an essay, which has to be succinct. The detail that gives these passages their point is normally not

understandable outside its context and may draw you into providing otherwise unnecessary explanation. It is best to summarise such ethnographic material for an essay.

Citing indigenous terms: In anthropology, issues often turn on the interpretation of indigenous ideas and the problems of vocabulary that this presents. In such cases, it is recommended that you do cite the terms used in the culture you are discussing, rather than some paraphrase such as 'the Indian equivalent of the gift'. (Here you would use but also explain the indigenous term *dan*.)

In some cases, you may decide to use quoted material. For example, in their book about the highly cosmopolitan African men and women who trade in illicit goods from their homes in Congo-Kinshasa to localities all over the world, the anthropologists Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga quote a woman trader on the worldwide networks of obligation and favours that she has built up:

Beatrice, on a trading trip to Los Angeles, goes to the brother of a friend she had known in Abidjan [in Ivory Coast, West Africa]. 'The first time I went, I relied on his help, and thereafter I found a cheap hotel. In Seoul [South Korea], I have 2 brothers-in-law. They know the language and the country; with their help I am able to buy at good prices. When I am with someone, I try to contribute. It is complicated because sometimes giving things annoys people. I sometimes bring food and leave it with people, or I propose buying some petrol. If people say not to worry, then one must find some other way to pay them back. (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000 *Congo-Paris: transnational traders on the margins of the law* Oxford, James Currey: p123)

Here, the quotation is vivid. And if you are to use one like it, you will probably have to use it all. This example also makes another point. Essays, like chapters in books, can interestingly open with a quotation of this kind to set the scene and perhaps also the tone, which thus stands alone. This can be an effective literary device, although like all such devices, you should not use it to excess.

More prosaically, there are conventions of presentation and punctuation. A quotation of more than three sentences or their equivalent, as in the three cases here, should be indented, without quotation marks. A quotation of lesser length should be included in a sentence of your own, with single quotation marks. A quotation within a quotation should be marked in the first case by single quotation marks, in the second by double quotation marks. Even in supervision essays, it is good practice to attribute longer quotations.

Sources for your essay

Supervisors will give guidance on how much general and background reading to do for a particular topic, and what this should be. It is sometimes essential to understand how others have approached an issue, and often useful to do so. But you should never just report what they have said. Mention them only if you intend to engage with them.

You will usually be asked to read authors taking different points of view. It is essential that you understand what these are, and explain them. In supervision essays, as in examination answers, you must not presume that your reader knows the source, and needs no more than an allusion to it. The reader may not know of it, and even if he or she does, will want to know what you know of it, what you take from it, and what you make of it. Always acknowledge those whom you read (see the **Department of Social Anthropology's policy on Copyright and Plagiarism**, available on the Social Anthropology website). For your own later purposes,

it is also a good idea to make a note, most safely, perhaps, on the essay itself, of the reference, edition of the source you have used, and the page number.

In anthropology, it is appreciated if you can be imaginative in your use of sources. For example, you might refer to fiction, film or material objects in your essay. But it is essential always to be aware of what kind of data this is, who created it, when, and why.

References and bibliographies

Few supervisors require footnotes in a weekly essay. Many, however, appreciate a list at the end of what you have read, and this can be a useful reminder to you when you come to re-read your essays, the written comments on them and the notes you may have made in conversation about them. It is useful, although for supervision essays not essential, to get into the habit of giving the full reference. Confusion can occasionally be caused by students using one edition of a work and supervisors knowing another; you may also wish to refer back to exactly what you read.

Word Processing

There is no requirement, as yet, that supervision essays be typed or word processed. But word processing does enable you more easily to revise as you write; word-processed essays are easier to read; and word processors make it easy to add notes you may have made in supervision. Some word processing packages include a bibliography programme. This is a useful means of recording everything you read (or at some point intend to read) and of instantly recalling references for insertion into your writing.

If you do word-process your essays, however, be careful not to lose the habit of writing by hand. This is essential for examinations, and continues to remain so. You should discuss with supervisors and your Director of Studies whether you should practice writing timed essays by hand in the weeks before an examination. If you have poor handwriting, raise it early with your supervisor or Director of Studies so that they can help you improve it or seek remedial measures. Many believe that writing is a particularly valuable revision strategy. Generous supervisors can be willing to look at handwritten timed practice essays.

Evaluation of essays

One of the purposes of supervision is to give you a response to your writing. You should listen carefully to what is said. Your Director of Studies is another source of advice and help with general issues of essay writing and exam strategy.

Grammar

The current school guidelines for grammar at Key Stage Two require students to:

- use correctly, and understand, the function of nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, and to use verb tenses effectively and consistently;
- use 'who' and 'whom' correctly;
- use apostrophes for possession and abbreviation;
- understand the syntax of complex sentences, distinguishing between clause and phrase;

- write clear and if necessary complex sentences, combining a range of subordinate clauses;
- use conjunctions and paragraphs effectively; and
- punctuate sentences with 90% accuracy, using commas to represent pauses and separate clauses.

Examiners for the Tripos will expect nothing less. All word processing programmes include a spell checker and some attempt to correct your grammar. Spell checkers, however, often use American conventions. They are of no help for most proper names. Unavoidably, their grammatical corrections are usually crude and rigid, and can occasionally give hilarious results. Eye and mind, and a good book of reference, are better. It is strongly recommended that you learn to spell the names of anthropologists and the place names and other key words and terms familiar to anthropologists.

Plagiarism

You should read the following carefully:

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged, verbatim citation of the work of others (including your friends) as if this were your own original work. It can also include paraphrase of the work of others, where that paraphrase is unacknowledged by way of footnote or some indication of the kind '...as Bourdieu claims' within your own text. A student may be found guilty of an act of plagiarism irrespective of intent to deceive.

If you include a sentence from a critic in the body of your own commentary and include that critic's article or book in your bibliography, it is still plagiarism; you will have offered it, in the context, as your own words rather than those of your source. All quotations within your own writing must be indicated by quotation marks and acknowledged.

If you are in any doubt about what does and does not constitute plagiarism, consult your supervisor. It is a serious offence, more readily detected than you might suppose. It can lead to suspension from an examination, and in some cases from the University.

Please see: the **Department of Social Anthropology's policy on Copyright and Plagiarism**: <https://www.socanth.cam.ac.uk/current-students/current-ug-student-info>

Please also see: the University website section on '**Good Academic Practice and Plagiarism**': <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/plagiarism/>

The evaluation of examination answers

Examination answers should be answers to questions, and they should be answers to the questions that you see printed on the examination paper.

'Essay dumping' (the attempt to answer an exam question with an irrelevant chunk of memorised supervision essay) is always heavily penalised. In the exam room, your key aim should be to answer the question as it is posed. Resist the twin temptations of writing down everything you know about the subject at issue, or regurgitating supervision essays. Ask yourself, before you start writing, what an answer to the question might demand, and which of the things you know might be relevant. Plan before you write: what is the short version of the answer you are going to offer?

Do not presume that the examiners are familiar with the facts and arguments to which you refer. They will be looking for evidence that you have done the reading and are knowledgeable about the material. They will not trust allusion or references merely to 'A's well-known case against B'.

At the same time, they appreciate that you will not have had the time to go into great detail. But they will expect to see the telling facts, the crucial steps in the arguments to which you are referring, and they will also want to see how your own argument connects to these.

It is usually not necessary to spend time on an elaborate introduction, and the conclusion can be brief. Time yourself carefully. It is important to finish each question and to complete the paper; examiners can give no credit for what is not there, and partial answers or hasty last-minute notes will significantly damage your result.

Answers are classed. A first-class answer will show an excellent command of a wide range of material or sources, be well argued, and show signs of insight and perhaps even originality. (A high first-class answer will display all these qualities to an exceptional degree.)

An upper second-class answer will show a firm grasp of relevant ethnographic and theoretical literature and will offer a clear, well informed and well organised answer to the question.

A lower second-class answer will use basic reading to provide information that is generally accurate, and will offer an adequate answer to the question.

A third-class answer will be acceptable, but reveal ignorance of some ideas and literature, or be inaccurate, or be poorly organised, or not answer the question asked.

An answer that shows at best minimal knowledge and understanding will pass. An answer that does not show either will fail.

Dissertations are also classed. The examiners will expect these to contain proportionately more detail, and for a first-class mark, some originality.

The Department of Social Anthropology's **Marking and Classing Criteria** is available here: <https://www.socanth.cam.ac.uk/raven-protected-documents/teaching-resources/ug-teaching-resources/part-ii-marking-and-classing-criteria.pdf>