The
Connell Guide
to

How to Write an Essay

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Chapter 1: About this book

Meanwhile, you will write an essay on 'Self-indulgence'. There will be a prize of half a crown for the longest essay, irrespective of any possible merit.
Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall*

I don't remember when I first heard the word 'essay'. Perhaps it was in the late 1970s. At the time my own homework consisted of spelling lists and making things with pipe cleaners, but my older brother was always grumbling about things called 'essays'. It wasn't long before I was grumbling about them myself, and ever since my life has been punctuated by them – writing them, reading them, setting them, marking them.

In Britain at least, you won't get through school without having to write an essay. Essays loom large in young lives, then, eventually, at the end of our teens or in our early twenties, they disappear, like exams, quietly and unmourned.

For the purposes of this book, an essay is a writing task set to students in a school or university. It may be a piece of coursework, a weekly tutorial essay, a term paper, a dissertation or an essay produced in a time-limited exam. As I am a teacher and examiner of English, the focus of this book is English literature. I hope, however, you will find the advice given here helpful in writing about other subjects too.

Some of that advice may contradict what you have been taught or, if you are a teacher, what you teach. That's fine. While you may disagree with me at least this book will make you think about your approach. And that in itself can only be helpful.

Chapter 2: The Question

FRANK: In response to the question, 'Suggest how you would resolve the staging difficulties inherent in a production of Ibsen's Peer Gynt', you have written, quote, 'Do it on the radio', unquote.
Willy Russell, *Educating Rita*

My friend the question

Teachers tend to say the same things over and over again. Some of the students to whom they say the same things over and over again go on to become teachers. And so the catchphrase of one of my teachers has become my own: '*answer the* [insert expletive of choice] *question*'. There is much to be said for challenging received wisdom, but this particularly piece of received wisdom has persisted because it's the best piece of advice on essay-writing there is. So if you take one message from this book, let it be: *answer the question*.

Answering the question should be the starting point of your thinking and the focus of every word and sentence of the essay.

What *is* an essay question? It's somewhere between an invitation, a prompt and an order:

- It's an **invitation** because it's offering you the opportunity to show what you know and what you can do;
- It's a **prompt** because the person setting it is giving you the cue to get going;
- It's an **order** because, ultimately, you're being asked for something specific.

Let's start by clarifying a couple of things. In a tennis match, you try your best to make it as difficult as possible for your opponent to return your shot. Setting essays is not like that at all. A good question-setter *wants* you to be able to answer, fully and well. Secondly, the examiner has set this particular question because valuable and interesting things can be said in response to it.

So the question is not there to trip you up. It is not a dastardly trap laid by a twisted, sadistic individual who longs to watch you fail. It's the biggest single aid you've got to writing a good essay. It helps you to structure your answer, as many questions invite or even imply a certain structure of argument, as we'll see below. It's best to think of the question not as an obstacle but as your *friend*. And like a good friend, it needs to be embraced and constantly in your thoughts.

Answering the question

> FRANK: [...] There is a way of answering examination questions that is expected. It's a sort of accepted ritual, it's a game, with rules. And you must observe those rules. (He leans with one hand on the back of RITA's chair.) When I was at university there was a student taking his final theology exam. He walked into the examination hall, took out his pen and wrote 'God Knows all the answers', then he handed in his paper and left.
> RITA: (impressed) Did he?
> FRANK: When his paper was returned to him, his professor had written on it, 'And God gives out the marks'.
> RITA: Did he fail?
> FRANK: (breaking away slightly): Of course he failed. You see, a clever answer is not necessarily the correct answer.
> Willy Russell, *Educating Rita*

If it is so obvious that you have to answer the question, why do so many students fail to do so? It's not because they haven't prepared and revised. On the contrary. In my experience, students are most likely to fail to answer the question when they *have* revised carefully.

Let's imagine that Claire knows all about the role of Lucio in *Measure for Measure* and wrote a good essay on it a year ago. In the exam, however, Claire is out of luck: 'her' question doesn't 'come up' and

she isn't asked about Lucio but about the relationship between Isabella and the Duke. Claire knows about this, and if she gives it a few minutes thought and planning can produce a fine essay on it. But no – she really wants to write about Lucio. She's memorised ten quotations about him and three really long ones from an article she found online. What a shame that all this should go to waste!

So she writes, and writes well, about Lucio. But she wasn't invited, prompted or ordered to write about Lucio. And so poor Claire can't receive the high marks she perhaps deserves.

At worst, a failure to answer the question can come across as a wilful refusal to engage with an instruction; most often, however, it suggests a timidity, a lack of confidence in your own ability to think new things or to think in new ways about what you already know. An examiner knows this, but ultimately has to be tough. If you don't answer the question, you're not doing your job. If you went to a restaurant and ordered fish and the waiter brought you ice-cream, you'd be disappointed, however much you like ice-cream and however good the ice-cream might be.

Questioning the question

> Once I'd got into the way of turning a question on its head... I began to get pleasure out of the technique itself... sketching out skeleton answers to all sorts of questions and using the same facts, for instance, to argue opposite points of view, all seasoned with a wide variety of references and quotations. I knew it wasn't scholarship, and in the Final Honours schools it would only take me so far, but it was my only hope.
> Alan Bennett, 'Introduction' to *The History Boys*

Let's imagine you've been set an essay question. Write it down in full in the middle of a piece of paper. You may prefer to plan on a screen but at this stage pen and paper give you more flexibility. You can jot things down, cross them out, join words or phrases with lines or arrows.

Once you've written down the question, you're going to question it. This will help to form an initial spider-diagram of ideas; it won't be an essay plan and you'll struggle to write a good essay based on it alone. It's merely stage one.

The first question to ask is: *what format does the question take?* Once you've identified that, other useful questions follow.

The precise wording will vary, but you will probably find that your question follows one of these formats:

1. Questions that offer a judgment on a text or character and ask you to comment on that judgment

These questions will offer a critical view (often in quotation marks, though usually devised by the examiner rather than taken directly from a critic)

and invite you to respond to and evaluate it. Here are a few examples:

> *'More a victim of his own arrogance than of political plotting.' How far do you agree with this view of the character of Coriolanus?*

> *'Heaney's poetry shies away from direct political statement.' How far do you agree with this statement?*

> *'Good writing about sexual relationships is invariably moral.' How far does your reading of any two texts lead you to agree with this statement?*

Alternatively, these questions may paraphrase an idea rather than use a direct quotation:

> *Explore the idea that* A Midsummer Night's Dream *is essentially a movement between order and chaos.*

> *Explore the idea that Ruth is the only truly powerful figure in* The Homecoming.

> *To what extent do you agree that the search for a home is central to modern American literature?*

In many ways, these are the most straightforward questions to answer as they offer a perspective on

the text or character that you can immediately question: does it match your own reading of the play or character? Are there nuances that you feel that the judgment overlooks? Such questions lend themselves very well to a **for-and-against** structure.

A useful way to begin to think about this type of question is to ask yourself the following questions:

a) why might someone believe this statement?

b) why might someone disagree with this statement?

Let's take an example, using a text that you may know.

> *In Romeo and Juliet, there is an unbridgeable gap between the younger and older generations.*

Why might someone believe this statement?

- The play constantly emphasises the difference between the older and younger generations. Younger characters such as Romeo, Tybalt and Mercutio are constantly seen in action, often violent action, whereas the older generation are seen as less athletic and energetic. (e.g. Lady Capulet mocks Capulet's request for his 'long sword', suggesting that a crutch would be more appropriate.)

- The first time we see Romeo he is a mystery to

his mother and father, to the extent that they do not know where he is and quiz his cousin Benvolio to find out the source of his melancholy.

- Juliet's parents seem incapable of understanding her: her mother calls the nurse to remain with them in Act 1, Scene 2, as if she is uncomfortable being alone with her daughter. Juliet lies successfully to both of her parents, to the extent of convincing them that she is dead.

- Juliet's soliloquies suggest her isolation and the distance that separates her from her parents.

Why might someone disagree with this statement?

- The Nurse is a member of the older generation and her relationship with Juliet is one of the most intimate in the play (though they become more distant after Act 4).

- Friar Laurence is clearly a member of the older generation, yet he offers friendship, wise counsel and support to both Romeo and Juliet. Just as the Nurse is a kind of surrogate mother to Juliet, so Laurence is a kind of surrogate father to Romeo (Romeo's first line to him is 'Good morrow, father').

- Capulet is not always a tyrannical father to Juliet.

When Paris first approaches him with a view to marrying Juliet, he is considerate of her wishes and her youth. Shakespeare does not present parents and children as implacable enemies; the gap between the generations is not unbridgeable.

Already, we can see that by asking these two key questions, we have the skeleton of a for-and-against argument. Test this method out by asking the two questions of a statement-based question on one of the texts that you are studying.

2. Questions that ask you to explore the ways in which a theme is presented

This is perhaps the most common form of question. It identifies a theme that the examiner recognises to be important to the text and asks you to think about the significance of the theme and *how* the writer explores it.

Consider some of the ways in which domestic space is explored in Plath's poetry.

Discuss Webster's presentation of death and dying in The Duchess of Malfi.

Consider the significance of the farm in modern South African literature.

These questions are trickier than questions which offer you a critical view or judgment. They don't offer

a ready-made reading of the text which you can test and interrogate. You've got to do a little more work.

If we're not careful, we can end up just providing a rather monotonous list or catalogue of, say, ways in which characters die in *The Duchess of Malfi* rather than a close examination of *how* death and dying are presented and what the significance of death is in the play.

When faced with a 'theme' question, try to think about it from the outset in *multiple* ways. It's likely that the theme will seem to be particularly important to one particular character or moment, but we can open up further possibilities by considering other, less immediately obvious possibilities.

For example, a question on kingship in *Richard II* will prompt us to think immediately about the figure of Richard. But how might our argument develop if we remember that Richard is not the only king we see in the play? What about Bolingbroke? Or even the idealised figure of Richard's 'grandsire' Edward III, whom we never see but to whom a number of characters allude?

Or we might try to think from the outset about *different* ways in which a theme is presented, with a view to moving towards an eventual multi-phase 'for and against' structure. For example, we might ask ourselves about how domestic spaces in Plath are seen as threatening but equally how they are seen as protective and comforting.

3. Questions that ask you to explore the presentation and significance of a particular character or relationship

> *Discuss Hartley's presentation of Leo's relationships with Ted Burgess and Lord Trimingham* in The Go-Between.
>
> *How does Beckett suggest the tensions between Hamm and Clov in* Endgame?
>
> *How does Austen's writing make Henry Tilney such an appealing character in* Northanger Abbey?

Although character-based criticism fell from favour long ago in academic circles, character-and-relationship-based essay questions remain popular, especially in schools. However sophisticated we later claim to be, most of us first have our interest in literature fired by the complexity and charisma of characters and by the fireworks between them. Teachers and examiners know this.

In answering such questions, it's important to remember that literary characters, however compelling, aren't real people and mustn't be discussed as if they are. Students are understandably seduced by Heathcliff's charm, or fired with indignation at the insults and degradation that he suffers, moved by Shylock's love for his daughter