

Academic Essay Writing: The case of Term Papers

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Abstract

This paper argues for a rational and consistent way of writing academic essays with a particular focus on term papers, commonly called, 'exposés'. The term paper which has become commonplace in many tutorials (TD's) is, in effect, a well-documented composition based for the most part on outside readings; these readings may be from books, articles, and, not least, from web-retrieved documents. However, notwithstanding the dichotomy of writing as a process and product, there are conventional research methodological considerations that *a priori* help the writing of an academic composition and pave the way for a better conception of the topic under consideration. These considerations form the core of the present paper.

The paper I am going to present before you today is entitled: **Academic Essay Writing: The Case of Term Papers**. It is, in fact, a consistent summary which attempts, in gross, to specify a set of methodological principles underlying essay writing. To clear the ground, I should say straight away that it is primarily intended to those who are new at the game. So in our very specific context, it is addressed to 2nd, 3rd, 4th and by extension to Magister students, since they are required as part of the overall evaluation of their academic performance to write term papers also called library papers or what we commonly call in our universities "**exposés**".

The first thing the student should do in such an assignment is obviously **(1) The choice/selection of the topic**.

The business of choosing or selecting a topic is a crucial determinant and a very sensitive issue. I view it so and I see it this way, because by cause and effect relationship, it is closely related to a number of parameters.

The 1st parameter is **the student's interest**. So what is actually meant by student's interest?

Is it the student's own choice of the topic? Or has the topic been imposed on him or her?

As teachers, we all too often hear our students say, "**I wanted to deal with X topic, unfortunately I was taken by another student**"

So this means that our teachers don't allow their students to deal with the same topic. As for me, I see no harm in having two students dealing with the same topic. Notwithstanding the overlapping or common aspects in both essays, in one way or another, there is always something new in either essay; here lies the complementarity.

The 2nd parameter that is part of the topic selection is **2) the availability of sources**; this criterion is of paramount importance. It is of paramount importance in the

sense that it determines the amount and nature of information about the topic in question. I should also note here that a few sources provide little, sketchy and down-to-earth information, which may lead to an extensive reliance on one specific source and which may, in turn, lead to a subjective analysis of the topic. As the adage has it, "**Two heads are better than one**"

The 3rd and last criterion is the student's writing pace. This criterion is also very important because it is part of the time-management process and students are most of the time limited by the submission deadline. A very important remark imposes itself at this step: Students should allow themselves some time to review their work. This period of time varies from some hours to a few days depending on the nature of the topic, and here I leave open the notion of the nature of the topic in question

This work review phase can also serve as a basis for self- assessment in terms of clarity, organisation and presentation. I move on to the 2nd point which is:

2. The Preparation of a Bibliography

At this step, the student should draw a list of the different sources of information, books, articles, magazines, etc. from which he/she will get the material. This could be done with the help of his/her mates, teachers and the librarian. In most cases, we should regretfully note, that the librarian is of no help. It is not my fault, "it's Voltaire's" to borrow a French famous idiomatic expression.

Always within the preparation of the bibliography, we should note that paradoxically some secondary sources provide more explicit, clearer and better-presented information than the primary or original sources. The examples, at hand, I can give to illustrate this point is Chomsky's TG or Vigotsky's theory about the Zone of Proximal Development.

Here I must open a parenthesis to speak about the use of the Internet as a source of information. Though the Internet provides a valuable source of information, we have noticed among our students and teachers alike that there is an extensive reliance on such a source to the extent that this has led to a total neglect of the classical academic sources (the use of the library and other information centres)

I feel sorry to say that some information provided by the web is sheer vulgarisation; the web-retrieved material is initially intended to the layman, not the specialist. [The vulgarisation process, as I see it, operates at the level of the choice of words, in other terms, at the level of word simplification, and it's axiomatic that simplification leads to vulgarisation].

The 2nd criticism I can make concerning the overuse of the internet as a source of information is that it provides what I would call ready-made research, and this will systematically have negative and harmful effect on the way research is to be carried out academically, scientifically and methodologically speaking. Yet, the internet can be used as an additional information provider. Now, I move on to the third point which is

3) The Selection of the Reading Material in terms of the Relevance to the Topic under Investigation.

The 1st thing I start with in this point is rather a valuable advice I would like to give our students. A lot of essays lose marks for containing material that is simply irrelevant. The student should bear in mind that the sort of material he/she is reading is

closely related to the assigned topic. Even if the student when searching for his/her essay, comes across a lot of interesting material, he/she should be selective, as interesting material won't gain the student extra mark, unless it is relevant. However, he/she must bear in mind, once again, that all interesting material should be oriented towards the assigned topic. It is, all too easy, I must say, to drift away from the assigned topic. So the next point is:

4) The Development of an Outline

After completing a preliminary bibliography and a minimal of general reading, what we call, reading survey, the student should start making a preliminary outline that will give direction to the investigation. So, what is an outline?

Methodologically speaking, an outline represents the skeleton of a research paper, be it an essay or a doctoral dissertation. By extension or by analogy, almost every thing man does requires a guide, building a house requires a building plan, making a car requires an initial conception/ design, so writing an academic essay requires an outline.

The 5th pt, I'd like to speak about in the following section is:

5) Originality

Straight away, I should confide that originality is one of the most difficult and hardest things to achieve in an essay, but needless to recall that any effort the student makes at being original will be noticed by the marker. But still what is meant by being original? To bring novel aspects to the work, yes, to invent a new theory each time we write an academic essay, yes, to state the thesis and its counter-part the anti thesis, yes. To get back to our context, is it possible and feasible each time one is required to write an exposé? To ease the burden for our students, I must say that there are a number of smaller ways to achieve originality without, so to speak, conforming to points I've just mentioned, for example, to provide one's own examples rather than borrowing examples from books, or to try to make new connections between particular viewpoints (the status of French in Algeria).

The concept of originality would lead us to speak about the use of quotations. It's a rule of thumb; we don't quote for the sake of quoting. We only use a quotation when we are unable to say it better, and that's the way I finish with the concept of originality.

6) The Length of the Essay.

Straight away I should say that term length reflects a relative notion. In other words, on what basis do we assert that the exposé is long or short? Is it in terms of the number of pages? May be yes, may be no.

Academically speaking the notion of length is measured in terms of the number of words the term paper consists of. Usually the number of words in our context ranges from 1000 to 1500 words, in terms of page number, it represents between 5 to 7 pages respectively.

On the other hand, I should remind the audience that what matters most in academic essay writing is not how much one writes about something, but how well he/she does it.

To finish this paper and to make our students escape from the realm of the 'red pen', here is a checklist consisting of worth-noting questions before submitting the final draft:

- Is the bibliography correct? In other words, does the way the references have been written obey the conventional usage?
 - Is all cited material referenced? In other words, does my bibliography section consist of all the authors I have previously mention in my work?
 - Is the word length OK? In other words, is my essay too short or too long in terms of the number of words an exposé should consist of?.
 - Is my essay well-structured and properly presented in terms of the general lay-out? In other words, does my essay follow and obey the rules of editing in terms of paragraph consistency, headed sections, footnotes and types of character, i.e. the use of italic, bald, underlined printing devices the computer offers.

Most of the ideas presented in this paper are the result of teaching experiments over a number of years. I cannot state precisely whose ideas I have elaborated. For these reasons it is hard to indicate where I read about a specific idea. I would like to make it clear that my main concern is not to claim originality for the ideas suggested, but to give students the best chance of writing an extended essay following methodological principles that underlie academic writing.