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Remember to schedule your essay well. Don't wait until the last few days to do the research, or you're likely to find all the good books have been signed out already. Don't wait until the last minute to do your writing, because if you discover you're missing a key bit of information, you may not have time to get it. Worse, you might end up feeling ill or having conflicting obligations the night before the essay is due, and no reasonable teacher or professor will give you an extension if you bring them a pathetic excuse such as, "I had to go to work," or "I had a headache." Furthermore, whatever you churn out in the wee hours of the morning is bound to be second-rate at best. Leaving the essay to the last minute is also tempting Murphy to throw in problems such as malfunctioning printers, computer crashes, being out of toner or paper, long lines at the printers on campus, etc. Aim to have your essays done one full week before they are due.

Scheduling also means not trying to finish all the parts of the essay in one day. Your brain and body need rest between research and writing. Your final product will be much better if it is created through diligent use of time.

Title Page

Even if it's not a stated requirement, it's a good idea to have a title page on your essay. It looks good, and serves as identification should the essay be misplaced (and if you've seen the inside of a typical professor's office, you can understand how this could easily happen). Again, some instructors might give you guidelines for a specific format and information. Otherwise, follow this model, centred on a clean page:

Joe Smith: His Life and Contributions to Widget Watching

by Kimberly Chapman
Student Number: 154 696

For Professor Corran Webster, Office CBC B306
Course: Honours Widgetry 101

September 29, 2000

Introduction

An introduction doesn't have to be done in one paragraph, and definitions don't necessarily have to come first. The introduction gives the reader the essential information.

The Main Body

Try to relate each paragraph to the next in some fashion. In longer essays, you can also use subtopic structures (subtitles).

Conclusion

In your conclusion, follow the same rules as the introduction: don't kiss-up, don't use 'I,' and don't be cheesy. Also, don't declare the future for certain, tempting though it might be to make grandiose statements about how your topic will be viewed in the future. The conclusion is your final chance to tell the reader why they should care about your topic.

Use of Quotations

Your essay should reflect your interpretation of many sources, not be a summary of what the sources said.

Too many quotations looks like laziness on your part. It also may hint that you don't really understand what your sources have said, but you're just going to throw their words in there to impress the instructor. Never put two quotations back-to-back; either paraphrase one or both, or find something to go between them.

Long quotations can often be broken up by putting ellipsis (...) between relevant phrases. Only use the part of the quotation that is necessary, and put ellipsis in place of removed portions. **BUT BE CAREFUL!** If removing part of the quotation changes the meaning of the quotation, don't do it.

Reading Your Essay Over

It is probably the single most important thing you can do to improve your essay: **READ IT OVER TO YOURSELF!** That means actually read it, don't skim it. If you find that your brain inadvertently skims it, try reading it out loud and **listen** to how it sounds. Do the sentences sound jarring? Does it make sense? If you hadn't researched it, would you understand it?

To improve further, **GET A FRIEND TO READ THE ESSAY** as well. They may find inadvertent errors such as spell-check failures (i.e. "from" when you mean "form" and vice versa), bad edits (i.e. Smith went to the a store (forgot to remove "a" or "the")), repetitions (i.e. He said, "Blah blah blah," he said), and other elements you may miss after staring at it for so long. Furthermore, if your friend is completely confused as to what you mean by a particular sentence, paragraph, or the entire essay, you know you have done something wrong. You don't have to accept every bit of nitpicking advice from your friend, but keep in mind that if they don't understand your phrasing, your teacher or professor may not either.

Cleaning Up

If you're using a computer and don't bother spell-checking your essay, you deserve marks off for every spelling error you make. It only takes a few minutes, and an essay rife with spelling errors looks sloppy and unfinished.

Go over the essay for consistency. As mentioned throughout these instructions, it is vitally important that you attribute anything you have taken from another source. Plagiarism is a serious offence, and one that many universities will expel you for. You do not have to attribute basic facts, nor do you have to attribute your own analysis and thoughts. But if you didn't come up with it and you're not sure if it's basic, attribute it. Keep in mind that if you thought of something yourself and then found it confirmed in a source, you must attribute it to the source. They get credit for publishing it before you did.

Bibliography

This is a list of all quoted sources as well as other influential sources. You don't have to actually cite the source in order to include it in your bibliography, but don't include source that you didn't even read.

As with attribution, there are many styles of bibliographies.