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The Writing Place Guide to Exams

By Chirag Patel

Before the exam: Reading

1.1 How should I read?

That sounds like a stupid question;

after all, if you couldn't read, you wouldn't be here, right? At university, however, the way you are meant to read is very specific, and very different to the kinds of reading you will have learned in other places.

At varsity, you are expected to process lots of complicated text quickly, and it's much more important that you understand what you're reading than that you can quote it. This is because you get marks for analysis, which is using information in relevant and interesting ways, not repetition, which is stating what other people have said without considering how correct they are. A lot of students don't understand this, and so end up losing a lot of marks because they think the lecturer just wants them to repeat what it says in the textbook; doing this will get you a maximum grade of 60%, no matter how good your work is, since any higher grade is reserved for essays that include analysis. There are three basic tricks to reading properly:

1) Don't jump in at the deep end.

Prepare for your reading by looking at summaries, dictionaries, Wikipedia articles, and other background material, so that you know what's going on around the text. You wouldn't drive somewhere you haven't been before without checking a map first, and the same applies to reading a text.

2) Always ask questions while you're reading.

You should treat all readings as comprehension exercises. Whatever you read, you should always be constantly asking the following questions:

General questions to ask when reading:

- What is the main point being made? Does it sound reasonable and meaningful?
- For each paragraph, what is the point?
- Does the point of the paragraph relate directly and clearly to the overall topic?
- How convincing is the argument?
- Is the evidence appropriate?
- Is there enough evidence?
- Does it consider all appropriate evidence [argument], or is it avoiding talking about something important?

Specific questions:

- Does it confirm something else you know or have been told?
- Does it contradict something else you know or have been told?
- Does it give support for one of the positions you need to consider in your essay?
- Does it give you further detail in an area you need to know more about, or does it just confuse the issue?

3) Read the important bits first, and leave the confusing bits 'til later.

There is a very simple technique that can help your reading a great deal. Because virtually all academic text is written in the same way, this method works at all levels from paragraphs to books, so keep it in mind.

Read the first, middle, and last sentences of each paragraph. The first sentence will tell you the claim the author will prove in the paragraph; the middle one will include the proof; and the last will give you the conclusion of the claim balanced against the proof.

Pay close attention to the beginning, middle, and end, but don't worry about any other information. This will help you get an outline of the reading in your head that the rest fits into, like having instructions to go with all the bits of the model you're building. This is much less confusing than picking up the pieces one by one and trying to fit them together in the order they come out of the box.

1.2 Why shouldn't I read every word?

The reason the technique above works is that virtually all academic writing has the same structure. Every paragraph, every chapter, every book, every course, the overall pattern is the same. Reports are written differently because they serve as a summary and index of other work, rather than trying to convey arguments or ideas. This basic method has been so effective that every single academic discipline uses the same structure, adapting it for their own purposes. It goes like this;

- (Thesis) The basic claim the author is making, and tells you what the author wants you to think about the text, and how they are going to approach the question they set themselves.
- (Antithesis) The meat of any paper. The antithesis balances the arguments and evidence for and against a claim.
- (Synthesis) The conclusion, in which all the questions and conflicts that have guided the discussion have been resolved.

Although this is obvious in academic texts, it is the same elsewhere. Consider a novel, in which the situation is set up, a conflict is introduced, there's a period of resultant tension, and a climax which leaves you with a particular impression of the book and the characters, tying together all the ideas that have been considered.

Your own writing should also follow this structure at all levels; it is how each paragraph, section, and essay should be written. Done properly, it links together your essay so that it all hangs together.

1.3 What kinds of reading are there?

Skimming– this is to get the overall idea of a text. In almost all cases, you should be doing this first, to make sure you have an overall idea of what the text says and where it's going. ALWAYS SKIM FIRST.

Scanning – when you're looking for a specific piece of information, like looking up a number in a phone book or reading a timetable. This is what you should be doing when you're doing your references and secondary reading. If you have an essay topic in mind, then you only need to read the bits that are relevant to that topic. Doing this will also help you pick up the words that you need to look up, since you'll see repetition of the important terms.

Comprehension – the slowest kind of reading, this is where you are reading to understand. It's best done by first skimming the text to get the general idea and arguments, and then going back over it looking for the topic sentences and checking particular arguments. If you try and jump straight in to this level, you will almost certainly not understand what you are reading; however, this is the level you're meant to be at, and it's much easier to achieve by going over the text quickly several times than banging your head against it until your brain stops working.

2. The exam itself

2.1 How should I prepare immediately before the exam?

There is a very simple checklist to make sure you perform as well as you can on the day of the exam.

- Eat right; don't have any caffeine or alcohol late in the evening before, and eat a proper meal (i.e. not fast food).
- Make sure you have everything you need for the exam packed into a bag the night before.
- Get a decent night's sleep; go to bed at a reasonable hour, and get up early enough to get ready for the day and have breakfast without rushing.
- Don't study in the morning of the exam; the added stress of cramming will remove any advantage it could give you.
- Take short breaks in the middle of the exam to stretch, look around, leaf over the paper again, breathe deep, sit up straight, etc. Breathing exercises and stretching both before and during the exam are very important; if your body is distracted, your mind won't be able to function properly.

2.2 How should I manage my time?

- At the start, work out how much time you have for each section based on the amount of marks the section is worth. You'll probably know this before you go in, so keep in mind how long you expect each section to take.
- Answer the easy stuff first, and come back to the harder, more time-intensive questions.
- Keep the first 15 minutes free for reading over the whole exam paper, so you don't get surprised by a sudden very hard bit appearing,
- Keep the last 15 minutes free for going over and editing what you've written. This editing will significantly improve your mark in most cases.

2.3 What do I do when my mind goes blank?

First of all, breathe. When you get that first flush of panic starting to creep in, sit up straight in your chair, look straight ahead, and take two or three slow, deep breaths with your stomach. Most importantly; DON'T PANIC. You will be okay.

Panic is a physical reaction that strongly affects your mind, but it can be countered and controlled. It makes your breathing shallower and faster, so force yourself to breathe slower; it makes you nervous, so sit back in your chair and have a slow look around. Don't worry about the time; losing five minutes doing nothing but calming yourself down and casually look over the paper will improve the quality of your work.

2.4 How do I prepare for lots of different topics, or questions I can't anticipate?

It's impossible to prepare everything for most exams, and this problem increases the higher up you go. The normal response of panicking and trying to force the entire course into your head, WILL NOT WORK. If you're pushed for time, these are simple techniques you will help prepare in the broadest sense.

- Get familiar with the details of a few different examples. Know enough about these examples to adapt them to a variety of questions; you do this by understanding the examples and their implications.
- Glance over as much of your reading as you can; don't worry about following it too closely, what you're looking for is the argument structure and example/evidence types, which your brain will pick out as you scan.
- Read dictionary, encyclopaedia & Wikipedia definitions of the central terms; words, names, ideas, etc. Get these definitions and ideas clear in your head.
- Read over any marking schemes you have so you know what the markers are looking for.

2.5 How should I approach essay questions?

1. Get your head around the topic. Write out a list of things you will need to say in the essay. Take five minutes to do this. It doesn't matter if this is a random list of words, so long as it focuses you around the topic (this is called priming, and works like warming up the engine on a car; basically, before you do any proper work, you should take a minute to look around, get your bearings, and relax into the subject.)

Also, write down three or four good examples; ideally, you want one example that you can link to each main point that you make. These examples should include one or two that you've found or researched yourself, not just the ones used in lectures.

From this list of examples and terms, work out the most important things you've written and number them; this and the examples will give you a basic structure to work with, and start you thinking of how you'll fit in the other, more random words and examples.

2. In your introduction, first restate the question, trying to put it in different words; this will either show exactly how you have understood the question. If you can't do this, or what you write doesn't sound much like the question, there's a good chance you don't really get it. If so, DON'T PANIC. You can always change topic if you try one and it doesn't work; the lost time will still be better than all the stress of trying to force an answer to come for a question you can't answer.

Try and state all of the topics you will cover, and give an idea of the conclusion you are going to reach. In most essays, you'll want to give four or so main points, and there will be a clear answer that you will be expected to give.

3. When you're writing the individual paragraphs, get your point in early, and make sure that everything you're saying relates directly to the topic. Also, make sure you keep to the time. Writing a smaller amount of good text is far better than pages and pages of drivel.

4. Summarize in your last paragraph. Restate the question, what conclusions you have reached in your essay (the topic sentences of each paragraph) and then give a clear answer based on these conclusions.

2.6 How do I answer multiple choice questions?

If you're not sure of the answer, you can always make an educated guess. This doesn't mean you should guess at random; if you keep the following tips in mind the chance that you'll guess right is significantly increased.

- Be prepared to change your answers; more often than not, going from wrong to right is three times as likely as going right to wrong, so the odds are in your favour; if you think an answer should be changed it's the right thing to do.
- Read the question carefully; it will usually have a clue that eliminates at least a couple of the answers as being in the right area, but not correct.
- Read through quickly, answering the easy questions and leaving the hard questions; this will make sure you get the easy marks first before you spend time trying to figure out the hard questions.
- Eliminate options that you know are false, such as those that contradict something else you know.
- If the question or answers are confusing, try rewording them to see how else you could ask the question.

2.7 Why do I lose marks on multiple choice questions?

The main thing is that the answer is in front of you. Because the answer is in front of you, you get overconfident, and make easily avoidable mistakes. It's very, very easy to lose a lot of marks in multiple choice questions simply as a result of not reading the question (or the answer you've picked) closely enough.

The other important thing is to check how much the marks are worth. Multiple choice sections tend to be worth the same for every question, which means if the question takes too long it's more worth your time to skip it and come back at the end if you have time than to struggle over the answer. For example, if you have a 45 mark multiple choice exam and 50 minutes, then any amount of time over a minute spent thinking about that question is marks you're losing somewhere else.

3. General writing and reading tips

3.1 What makes a good introduction?

A good introduction should:

- Show how you are going to answer the question
- Show that you understand the issues and their implications
- Give the structure of your answer and make clear the main areas you are going to write about.
- Show evidence that you have carried out some research by making references to at least one source
- Only say things that are specific and relevant
- Use words and expressions which clearly show the essay plan (e.g. The essay is divided into four main sections. It will first consider ... It will then go on to describe ... The third part compares ... Finally, some conclusions will be drawn as to ...)
- Use similar wording to the question, to show you understand it well enough to say in your own terms.

3.2 What is a topic sentence, and how do I use them?

A topic sentence is a summary of the point you are making. You should be able to describe each paragraph with one of these sentences; a list of these sentences forms the body of your conclusion. Each paragraph should then be an investigation of one of these sentences, giving proof for the claim that you are making – see 2.4 for what counts as evidence.

For example, these are topic sentences, each of which is acceptable as a main point:

- South Africa's world role has suffered economic and political decline.
- The South African constitution is under threat.
- The influence of human behaviour makes planning difficult.
- Given the relative advantages and disadvantages of the different operating systems, Windows 2 is better than the Macintosh OSX.

The following sentences are unacceptable, because they are too vague, and do not make a clear point (and therefore cannot be the basis for a paragraph):

- This paragraph is about South Africa's economic and political decline.
- South Africa's constitution.
- The influence of human behaviour on planning.
- The different operating systems.

3.3 How do I make my writing formal and impersonal?

- Avoid personal language (I, my, we etc)
- Never use emotional language; be objective rather than subjective
- Never use vague or imprecise language
- Try to make sure whatever you say cannot be misinterpreted
- Avoid being too dogmatic and making sweeping generalisations.
- Use some sort of "hedging" language (see below) and to qualify statements that you make
- Consistently use evidence to back up what you are saying, and reference correctly.
- Refer to people by their proper names, usually by their surname. This goes for characters as well; you almost never refer to people by their first names.
- In general, the writing you read will be dense, with long, complex sentences. You should not sound like this; remember that your main aim is clearly expressing your ideas, so don't be too ambitious, particularly when you're starting to write.

3.4 Points to remember in writing

- You must have an argument that you are trying to make in your essay. An argument is a claim that makes logical sense and gives evidence for it being true, not simply something that someone has said.
- You should be able to put across different points of view – both from the various reading materials you are drawing upon and the different theoretical approaches you know about.
- You need to have a clear introduction and a conclusion that summarises everything you've said.
- Never appeal to what “people” think, or what “they” do, without a reference. If your reference is that everybody knows it, then in most cases it's unacceptable. You will never lose marks for referencing too much, and always lose marks for not referencing enough.
- Try to think about what your lecturer wants from you in the essay; what have they said in class about what to talk about and what to avoid?
- **STICK TO THE TOPIC.** Do not **at any point** discuss something that is not clearly related to the questions you are being asked. Make sure the paragraph you're writing is obviously connected to the paragraphs before and after it, and to the topic.

3.5 What should I be checking while I'm writing?

Your main goal is to write a well backed-up response to the essay topic. This response must be thorough and able to be clearly understood. While you are writing, try to keep sentences short, each making a single point. If you find that your sentences are very long, you're probably waffling. A simple trick to check this is to read your essay out loud to yourself. If you find you're out of breath mid-way through a sentence, then that sentence is too long.

At all stages, you should consider the following questions; if you have them in mind from the beginning, it will make the final work of editing your essay much, much easier.

Is the introduction clear?

Does it seem to be missing anything?

Is there anything there that shouldn't be there? Does it engage you with the question?

Do the topic sentences/ paragraph ideas make sense?

Is it obvious what each paragraph is specifically about?

Is there enough evidence for each point?

Is the evidence appropriate to the claim?

Are the paragraphs in a logical order?

Do they flow naturally from the introduction, and from each other?

What other evidence would/could you include to make the point stronger?

For this, you need to understand exactly what the question means. Most essay topics are in fact two or three separate questions, and you need to answer all of the questions. Break them down into sections, work out what each section is asking you to do, and then work out what you need to study to answer each part.

Written for The Writing Place
(UKZN, Howard College)
by Chirag Patel
Patelc1@ukzn.ac.za
Ex. 2943