

10 SOME COMMON WORRIES

- Plagiarism
- Writing too much
- Using the 'I' word
- Using your own experience
- Presentation, spelling and grammar

It is difficult to identify or predict all the worries that you may have in writing essays. But there are a few important points to know about and some things to avoid, so read this section carefully.

10.1 Plagiarism

Plagiarism means using someone else's work and passing it off as your own. It refers to copying other people's work word for word, or making only minor changes to it with the intention of representing it as your own. This does not mean that you are forbidden to use every word or phrase that appears in a text from which you are working. In particular, you will almost certainly need to repeat technical vocabulary. For example, it would look rather odd if an essay on Marxist theory avoided key conceptual categories such as 'class struggle' or 'relation to the means of production'. The problem occurs when you recycle whole sentences or paragraphs without indicating that these are quotations or paraphrased from your original source.

Of course, the question is how to avoid plagiarizing in the first place. A lot of people plagiarize unintentionally. Here are a few reasons why it may occur:

- *Bad note taking*
Sometimes you may find yourself copying chunks of text into your notes and then failing to put these in quotation marks. Similarly, when taking notes you may sometimes paraphrase from a source without putting the argument in your own words. In each case, these may then appear in your essay as an argument that bears a remarkable similarity to your source material.
- *Lack of confidence*
If an argument is very complex or you are particularly unclear about it, you may stick to your original source as closely as possible so you don't 'get it wrong' or because of a feeling that the words could not be improved upon. The problem is that the person who marks your essay won't be able to tell whether you have understood the argument or not since you won't have reproduced it in your own terms.

To avoid plagiarism, adopt good note-taking habits, always ask for help if you don't understand something, and re-read your essays before submitting them. Tutors can usually spot plagiarism because the style or tone of the writing will suddenly change. If you reread your essays you too will be able to notice when this happens.

It is important to get on top of this issue for a number of reasons. Most obviously, plagiarized work is likely to attract a fail grade. However, plagiarizing work is also of little educational benefit to you. The process of putting arguments into your own words is a crucial part of grasping ideas and committing them to memory. It also helps you to learn how to use and apply the ideas *for yourself*. Plagiarism, if nothing else, is thus a waste of your time since it probably means that you have not thoroughly understood what you have written.

Occasionally some people will deliberately plagiarize in an essay. This is a serious offence, since it is a form of academic theft. In the case of assessed course work, it is

also an attempt to gain qualifications by cheating. Deliberate plagiarism may incur such penalties as your institution determines.

Advice for OU students

If you are tempted to plagiarize because you are having problems with the course or have fallen behind with your work, telephone your OU tutor or seek OU counselling help instead. Your tutor or counselling service will help you identify a much better solution to the problem. General advice about avoiding plagiarism should be sought from your tutor in the first instance. The University's regulations on plagiarism are set out in the *Student Handbook*.

10.2 Writing too much

Most essays have word limits. Many students point out that they could easily write a whole lot more on any one topic. Indeed, people write 80,000-word books on the sort of issues that you address in your essays, so everyone knows that word limits can be rather restrictive. However, they are not set merely to irritate you. Shorter essays are an important academic tool. In writing them, you learn how to prioritize and select material, and how to condense big topics into a punchy, easily digested form. These are academic skills that you will need even in writing much longer pieces. We know that it is painful but, if you're writing too much, be ruthless. Concentrate on the biggest, most important arguments and examples and cut the rest. Your work will almost certainly be better for it.

You need to remember that on some courses marks may be deducted for an over-long essay (always check the regulations covering the specific course that you are studying). Furthermore, some markers may feel that writing over length allows you to cover a topic in more detail than other people and thus confers an unfair advantage on you.

10.3 Using the 'I' word

Sometimes you will be told that the first person pronoun ('I') should be avoided in social science essays (for example, that you should not write 'In this essay I intend to explore . . .'). This is because 'I' is sometimes thought to indicate a lack of objectivity. In this case, you can often ignore personal pronouns completely (for example, by writing 'This essay will explore . . .'). In fact, there are no hard and fast rules about using 'I' in social science essays. Different disciplines (and different individuals) tend to adopt different conventions. Clearly, in your writing you will want to avoid the excessive repetition of any word or phrase and 'I' is no exception. Perhaps the best way to find out whether the use of 'I' is appropriate to the particular course you are studying is to check with the person marking your work.

10.4 Using your own experience

Some essay questions will explicitly ask you to draw on your own personal experience – indeed, autobiography is a recognized research method in the social sciences. Additionally, relevant personal experience is sometimes used to add 'colour' to an argument or to grab the reader's attention.

Having said this, there can be a danger that, in the context of social scientific writing, personal experience will sound like 'bar-room philosophy'. In other words, it will be little more than unsubstantiated personal opinion. If you use personal experience you will need to demonstrate clearly how and why it is relevant to both the question and the course, and be able to substantiate any claims that you make on the basis of it.

10.5 Presentation, spelling and grammar

Your essays will be marked first and foremost on their content. However, spelling, grammar and punctuation are

important in essay writing. The baseline here is that essays should be readable and make sense. Your spelling, grammar and punctuation need to be good enough to communicate effectively to your reader and, at degree level or equivalent, this implies the ability to use conventions of spelling, grammar and punctuation correctly (see, for example, *The Open University*, 1998).

As a result, you should choose your words appropriately and correctly. Use of 'jargon' words has already been mentioned in 'Clear sentences and paragraphs' (in Section 7.4). If you use abbreviations or foreign words make sure you use them correctly (Appendix E has a list of those commonly found).

For further advice on use of written English see the resources listed in Appendix F.

Advice for OU students

If you have any concerns about any of the above or similar matters, particularly if you want support in developing your written English, you should consult your tutor or seek advice from OU counselling services.

For guidance on submitting tutor marked assignments consult your course assignment booklet. The regulations governing essay extensions are set out in the *Student Handbook*.

Summary

- Plagiarism means copying someone else's work and claiming it as your own. Plagiarized essays will normally attract a fail grade. Deliberate plagiarism, which constitutes cheating, may result in disciplinary action.
- Plagiarism is often unintentional. To avoid this make sure that you write essay notes in your own words and always put quotations in quotation marks or indent the

text; reread your essays, looking for sudden changes in style or tone; and seek help if you do not understand particular points to ensure that, when writing, you can reproduce them in your own words.

- Writing to a word limit is an important academic skill: it teaches you to condense complex material into its component parts, and to select and communicate core arguments.
- Personal experience can be a useful source of evidence and some courses require you to use it. However, be careful to relate it to the course and the essay question and to substantiate your claims.
- Essays are expected to be readable and to use conventions of spelling, grammar and punctuation correctly.