

# ADVICE ON WRITING ESSAYS IN ACADEMIC ENGLISH

Dr. Greta Olson

<http://www.greta-olson.com/>  
[greta.olson@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de](mailto:greta.olson@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de)

## General

- 1) Deadlines are our friends. Kindly see writing this paper as an exercise intended to help you to make writing in academic English easier. Do not make this essay into too large and too time consuming a project. If you cannot turn your paper in on time please contact me before the deadline, or your paper will be failed.
- 2) Get your nose dirty reading the text. Please see the primary goal of writing this paper as learning to develop and articulate your own opinion of the primary text. The next step is to back up your analysis using textual evidence from the primary source. Finally, you will need to learn to use secondary sources to further support your reading.
- 3) Avoid using sexist language. The “reader” is not a “he.” First, such writing dates your writing and makes it appear old-fashioned. Second, there is no universal male subject. Or, if there is, you will need to prove his existence to me first.
- 4) Do not assume that you can identify the views suggested by a given text with the personal sympathies of the historical author. The narrator or narrators of a piece of prose fiction and the speaker or speakers of a poem are not identical with the author of the text.
- 5) Avoid relying solely on internet texts. When using internet texts, ascertain that they are reliable. Have they been written by a recognized scholar in the field? Has the internet text been published? Has it been regularly updated? You will need to quote from at least three non-internet secondary texts in your essay.
- 6) Plagiarism is absolutely unacceptable and will result in a failed paper.

## Structure

- 1) What is the central topic or question of your essay? Make this clear in the very first paragraph of your introduction: "This paper questions whether Sonnet 130 can be considered a love poem." Or, "In this essay I want to examine the role of African-American women as depicted in Nikki Giovanni's 'Woman Poem.'" State your central idea as directly and clearly as possible.
- 2) Then go on to say how you will prove your central point: "By examining the non-idealized imagery that the speaker uses to describe the woman he addresses, I will argue that this sonnet offers a new definition of love."
- 3) You may want to say right off the bat which critics your interpretation agrees or disagrees with: "My reading confirms G. Blackmore Evans's interpretation of Sonnet 130."
- 4) Perform close analysis of several longer passages from the primary text. Describe the use of language, figuration (metaphor, etc), wordplay, rhetoric, and other stylistic elements as well as the content of these passages. How do these elements contribute to your overall argument you are making about the text?
- 5) In the conclusion to your paper you should state clearly how you have successfully made the argument you outlined at the beginning: "I have examined how the speaker of Sonnet 130 subverts typical comparisons of women to beautiful natural phenomena to develop new imagery for describing love. Thus I have shown that Sonnet 130 is, indeed, a love poem."
- 6) If you are unclear about how to structure your paper, write it in as straightforward a fashion as possible:  

Introduction: "In this paper I will show X. I will demonstrate X by looking at A, B, and C."

Body of Paper: Subsections A, B, and C

Conclusion: "Now that I have looked at A, B, and C, I have proven X."
- 7) Essays can also be structured quite differently. For instance, you might begin by stating what the general received interpretation of the primary text is. You could continue by saying why you disagree with this interpretation and how you are going to prove that it is incorrect.
- 8) Be careful to write coherent paragraphs and not strings of sentences. Every paragraph should develop one thought. It should have a topic sentence, a few

subsidiary or explanatory sentences, as well as a concluding sentence that provides a transition into the next paragraph. Here is an example of a typical paragraph transition:

.... Hence **on the one hand** new fiction on eating disorders reflects ugly social reality.

**On the other hand** fictional accounts of eating disorders illustrate major themes from Michel Foucault's work.

**Exercise:** Practice structuring your term paper:

1) One student comes up with a central thesis of an essay related to the course topic. Another student lists three subsidiary points that could be made to prove the thesis. Finally, another student states what would be written in the conclusion.

2) Discuss alternative ways to structure your paper and repeat the exercise above accordingly.

## Formalities

- 1) Quote texts in the University of Freiburg's modified MLA style by using parenthetical references that include the author's last name, the date of publication, and the page number, for example (Goatly 2007: 154). Please consult Prof. Fludernik's style sheet at <http://www.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/institut/lsfludernik/stylesheet.doc>. Alternately, you may refer to Professor Korte's style sheets. Note the difference in how to integrate short and long quotes into the body of your text.
- 2) Papers should be 12 pages long, typed 1½ lines apart. Margins should be justified (*Blocksatz*). The paper should also include a cover page, table of contents, and a works cited page. Indent each new paragraph so that it is absolutely clear where a paragraph (one thought) begins and ends. You do not need to indent a new paragraph after a subheading.
- 3) To prepare for writing *Hauptseminar* papers, please submit a table of contents and use subheadings in your essay. See style sheets. This does not apply if you will be going on to study in the American or British system.

## English Usage

In order to write successful papers it is important that you learn to develop your own opinions using textual evidence, to cite properly, to structure your papers coherently, and to not plagiarize. Additionally, you will need to write in the clearest English possible. Here are a few points that may help non-native speakers to write more fluently:

- 1) Protect the nucleus of your sentences (independent clauses). Do not put anything in between the elements of the subject-predicate-object kernel. Compare the following: “The link between Chancery and the symbol of the fog, which could in this connection stand for the obscurity and blindness of the court, characterizes Chancery on the symbolic level.” The sentence would be much more understandable if it was rephrased as follows: “The link between Chancery and the symbol of the fog is used to characterize the court symbolically. The fog represents the institution’s obscurity and blindness to the suffering it causes.”
- 2) Break up long sentences by using short independent clauses.
- 3) Use inter-punctuation in long sentences. Independent clauses must be separated by “,” or “:” or “;”. Avoid the overuse of dashes.
- 4) Avoid dangling modifiers as in the following: “Having thus far considered her to be an aristocratic lady, this scene shows...” The participle construction “Having considered” requires that the subject of the main clause is the person or persons who did the considering. A possible revision might be the following: “Having thus far considered her to be an aristocratic lady, the reader is surprised by how Lady Dedlock appears in this scene.”
- 5) Similarly, avoid sentences in which the logical connection between clauses is not clear, as in “Although society considers her to be an aristocratic lady, this scene proves...” This sentence could be revised as follows to make the connection between the clauses more transparent: “Although society considers her to be an aristocratic lady, it becomes clear in this scene that such a judgment is questionable.”
- 6) Use active verbs to strengthen your writing and to make it more clear what you are referring to.
- 7) Use present tenses to describe fictional events: e.g., *Marian feels that she is being hunted by Peter* and not *Marian felt that she was being hunted by Peter*.

Use the perfect tense to describe events that occurred at an earlier time in the narration. Only use the present progressive tense when you are describing an event that is occurring right at this moment.

- 8) Avoid the overuse of “the.” Compare “He dislikes Americans” and “He dislikes the Americans who continue to support Bush’s foreign policy.”
- 9) Do not use a comma before “that” in English as in *Again she stresses, that she is able to see everything very well, even though it is dark.* English has no ..., *dass* construction.
- 10) Be careful to use the determiners “this” and “that” correctly. When referring to a concept or event you have just mentioned, use “this.”
- 11) Be careful about the use of “it” and other pronouns as the subject of new sentences. Often it is better to reiterate what or whomever you are referring to. Pronouns in English refer to the last possible noun or proper noun: *Richard’s first puppet is poor Clarence, his brother. As said above he initiates the plot that... .* In the second sentence *he* would appear to refer to Clarence rather than Richard.
- 12) Using exclamation points in a formal essay in English is not appropriate. It is the stylistic equivalent of screaming an obscenity.
- 13) *At the beginning of* refers to something that happens at the very start of an event or period of time: *At the beginning of the novel Marian and Ainsley are in the kitchen of their apartment.* By contrast, *in the beginning* refers to something that happens during a period of time near the start of an event or longer period of time: *In the beginning I was too shy to speak up in class.* However, we do not say *in the end* in English but rather *finally* or *in the last analysis*.
- 7) Use the pronouns *one*, *we*, or *I*, or the expression *the reader* or *readers* when describing one’s response to the text: *One has the sense that Joan will never be able to bring her multiple identities together into one coherent whole.*
- 8) *Moll Flanders is no social outcast in the narrow sense* should read *Moll Flanders is not a social outcast in the narrow sense.* The construction *is not a* is unlike the German *ist kein*.
- 9) Capitalize names of religions and nationalities even when they are being used as adjectives: *Antonio is cruel to Shylock just because he is Jewish.*

- 10) Avoid *there are* and *it is* constructions in English as in the following: 1) *First of all there are, of course, the circumstances which let us sympathize with the governess,* and 2) *It is on that first evening that Oliver eats sausages for the first time in his life.* These phrases weaken your writing.
- 11) Be careful to pay attention to subject-predicate agreement: "*Autumn*" as well as "*evening*" **stands** *for an end, a change.* This should read *stand*.

**Exercise:** Break up and rewrite the following sentences to make them more clear:

1) *And in her excitement of finally having been given the chance of showing the ghosts to somebody else, somebody neutral, in order to prove that she's been true all the time, and that she's been right and not just a victim of her own imaginations and fantasies, she spontaneously points out at the apparition and wants both, Mrs. Grose and Flora to see—and what is more: to confess that they can see.*

2) *But whereas Oliver can be considered to be almost a personification of goodness, Fagin cannot be characterized as completely evil because he also shows human traits within the action, for example, when he warns Sikes of not being too violent to Nancy after he has experienced that she has betrayed the gang.*

## Grading

The English Department of the University of Freiburg has extremely high standards for the level of English required of its students. See writing your *Proseminar* paper as an opportunity for you to gauge your language ability and to see what you need to improve on before you go on to the *Hauptstudium*. Papers will be graded on the basis of content (50%) and form (50%). The grade for form is given on the basis of English usage, correct citational style, and structure. If your paper does not receive a passing grade, you are very welcome to rewrite it.