

Crib Sheet on Preparing and Writing an Essay or Thesis

- 1) **Early sighting of title and subsequent planning of proposed content is advised**...then let mental incubation do its job, as your subconscious is engaged. Given a chance, this will accomplish much. Keep a notebook handy for quick notes at all times, as your subconscious may produce results without warning. **From the beginning, also keep in mind who you are writing for**, and, the academic discipline or institution involved...this sort of self-guidance will keep you properly directed in thoughts, plans, and of course, ensure quality of finished output.
- 2) **If possible, have a reserved personal work area** which you can leave and return to at any time, and thus, easily resume your research and writing. Post notes, posters, photos, etc., readily visible in your work area, that will continue to prompt your important ally, your own subconscious. Find an interested, knowledgeable, and disinterested person, or persons, to discuss your work with, this will be very useful for clarifying and setting out ideas, again, aiding the function of your subconscious.
- 3) **Data accumulation, and general note-making, is best done in long hand**, superior memory, by direct association, will ensue, and, hard copy notes will more readily survive, (untroubled by power cuts and computer glitches, note...), plus, are optimally portable. Just be sure never to misplace pens, pencils, and hard-copy working notebooks....! **Long-hand** is best described as an A4/foolscap workbook, with all project notes, cuttings, jottings, post-it notes, et al, included, pasted, pinned, stapled....**does not leave the home desk. Plus, multiple WIP data copies in more than one form, as work progresses, of course....**
- 4) **Prior to writing up, Golden Phrase(s), and/or, ordered points are assembled.** A *Golden Phrase* is one that encapsulates your projected task, prompts the flow of words, and also helps your subconscious. Note that text may even run thru your mind like dictation....*be sure to record this when it occurs.* *Ordered points* will work, in lieu, though spontaneity of expression may be more of a task. Your subconscious will also work between the bigger picture, and, greater detail, often producing results during some mundane task, or, other unrelated activity, so, **be sure to take time off regularly from intensive and directed thinking, to keep your subconscious engaged and working, plus, keep jotting.**
- 5) **When writing begins, use short sentences, short paragraphs, and, refer often to the title, and your Introduction, to keep on track.** **Golden Phrases for sections and/or chapters will be an added bonus**, and help boost your subconscious. Once again, logical tabulation of points will also work in lieu. Your Title announces your subject, your Introduction will describe how you will approach this subject, your main body of text will follow, your Conclusion will summarize what you have written up, and, perhaps will allude to further research directions. Your References will support your treatment of core ideas and conclusions.
- 6) **Proof-read and edit as you progress**, and also, **read the text aloud**...if there is no real flow reading aloud, then your project it will not be easy, or pleasurable, to read silently, especially with assessors or markers in mind. Also, avoid informal grammar and spelling, this will also interrupt silent reading of your text, which can be irritating, especially for readers and assessors of formal presentations.
- 7) **References:** always be concise and to the point, not enough to break flow of main text reading, especially if included in main body, and, Bibliographies the same, with specific and general categories kept separate. To reiterate, **be sure that you adhere to recommended references protocols**, as mandated by the specific academic discipline, or, overseeing authority, if you are working outside the academic sphere.
- 8) **Always keep copies of what you research and write up**...even carbon paper books for notes may be useful at times, most certainly, observe the main rule of the working computer era...**if not backed up 3x, then good as not backed up at all, OK!** Even emailing your short-term output to yourself is useful in this respect.
- 9) **Use commonsense as regards maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and regular hours**, plus, be sure to seek pleasant and non-stressful activities when not engaged in your work. Avoid mental and sensory overstimulation, and over-tiredness. If your brain is not cared for, within a healthy lifestyle, this will consequently, and adversely, affect your creative academic output.
- 10) As already noted, **there will be some differences in presentation styles and protocols within respective disciplines**, so, you must be sure to verify what will be required. **Think also about the software tools you will use** to consolidate notes, and write assignments, with an eye towards how you should do '**backups**' and '**version control**'. **Backups** are more to deal with loss due to hardware failure, and your files not being accessible on your primary platform of choice, in contrast, **version control** is more about protecting you from yourself, eg, accidentally deleting a couple of pages from an important assignment but not immediately noticing this.

Note that a lot of software, used for '**backing up to the cloud**', has basic version control functionality, in that it automatically keeps a number of older versions of files that you can revert back to, if necessary. However, there is also software involved that specifically handles **version control**, (most designed with coders in mind), and it can have nifty functions, like comparing two versions of a file, and finding the differences. A lot of this additional functionality **assumes the files are simple text files**, so, if you think you might want to make use of this specific function, think ahead, and save your files in an appropriate format. For example, if you write up notes in LibreOffice or MS Word, etc. **save them as .rtf (rich text format)** rather than the native .odf or .docx format.

Specific to higher level research, you also need to think about how to keep track of references, notes on other people's papers, and, citations for a large numbers of papers. An Open Source program, **Zotero**, is highly recommended for this purpose: <https://www.zotero.org/>

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