

Essay writing

For MSc Gender studies

Dr Sarah Taylor

Learning Developer, LSE LIFE

Learning Lab
from **LSE** LIFE

Most frequent negative comments on essays

- a) Didn't answer the question (fully)
- b) 'Too descriptive' or 'lacks critical analysis'**
- c) Not clearly structured
- d) Sources used inappropriately

Today



Marking criteria



What is an essay?



Question your essay question



Arguments and criticality



Notes on structure



Using sources

Distinction 70-80%

Work of excellent quality demonstrating a high level of **conceptual and theoretical engagement** to produce a thorough and consistent approach which engages closely with the **implications of the question** (where relevant) as well as its surface meaning. Work will either **demonstrate wide knowledge and in depth understanding** that is presented **critically**, with insight and **independence** of thought. **Or**, it will demonstrate a **degree of originality** in the form of persuasive and well evidenced new ideas or unusual connections. **Referencing** is **complete, appropriate and consistent**. Some minor revisions could be made to improve further.

Pass (satisfactory) 50-54%

A rather basic answer to the question which demonstrates some knowledge and a basic understanding of lectures and course materials but which has not gone beyond this level of engagement. The work may be overly descriptive with very limited analysis. Argument is not well conceptualized or supported, There may be some stylistic, grammatical or factual errors and/or some inconsistencies in logic or minor errors in understanding.

What is an essay?

A focused piece of writing that:

- Has a central integrating **argument**, which should:
 - be logically developed
 - build up a case point by point
 - take a **critical and analytical** approach
- Draws on the literature (theory/argument/research) to support the argument

Note: there is not 'correct' answer to an essay question, just **better or worse arguments**.

Question the essay question

Don't take anything at face value!

- 'Interrogate' the question
- Analyse language and probe ambiguities
- Seek alternate interpretations
- Make explicit any underlying assumptions
- Read between the lines – is the question hinting at a debate in the field or a contentious issue?
- Try to write the question in your own words



Instructions ...

Instruction	What it means ...
<i>Analyse ...</i>	Examining a broad idea or claim and breaking it down into parts, giving in-depth explanations. Showing why these parts are important and how they relate or connect to each other.
<i>Discuss ...</i>	Investigating something and identifying its significant features, from multiple points of view, in order to argue your own point of view. Building a reasoned argument, weighing the merits of ideas, possibly making a case for/against an idea.
<i>Evaluate ...</i>	Making an appraisal of the worth of something, in the light of its truth or usefulness; and including, to some extent, your personal opinion or the opinions of others.
<i>... critically.</i>	

Exercise

In groups, choose one of the following essay questions and 'question the question.'

Assess the argument that an analysis of a race/gender system is as important as a sex/gender system for gender studies

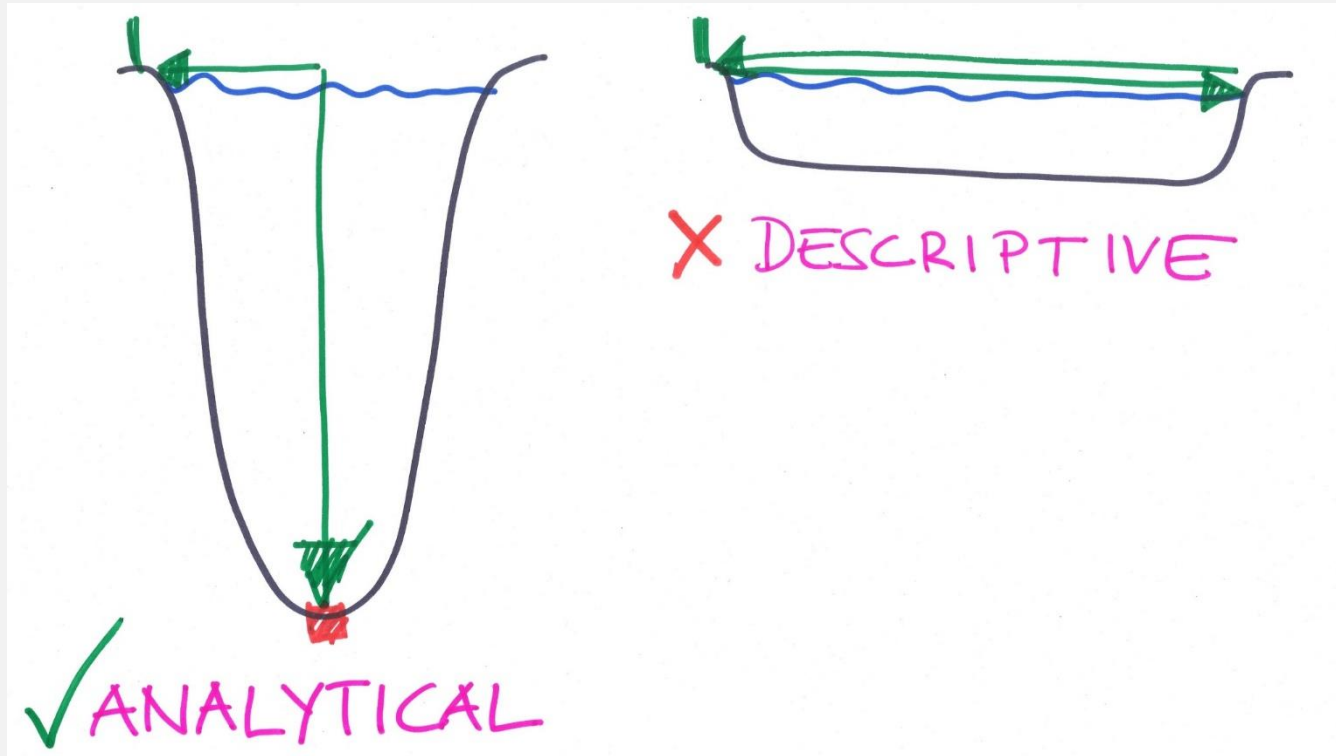
or

What might be the value of Foucault's conceptualisation of power for the study of gender?

or

Analyse the argument that political quotas are undesirable because they are essentialising

What LSE markers are looking for ...



What is criticality?

- **Analysing** your literature (theory/arguments/research)
- **Evaluating** what you read (strengths/weaknesses)
- **Taking a position** based on that evaluation (this is your argument)

Criticality starts with your reading

Question and comment on your readings when taking notes:

- What does this mean?
- Why has the author said this?
- Do I agree? Why/why not?
- Do other authors agree/disagree? Who makes the best arguments?
- Are there any weaknesses in the theory/argument/research?
- What are the strengths of the theory/argument/research?
- Can the theory be used to analyse a real example?
- What is the context in which the text was written (time/place/cultural/social etc.)?

Reading and notetaking first

1. Choose your essay question and think about your overall response to it
2. Take notes from relevant readings.
3. What supports your argument? What opposes it? How do you respond to opposing arguments?
4. Remember these topics are complex and nuanced – examine the complexity in depth rather than trying to simplify

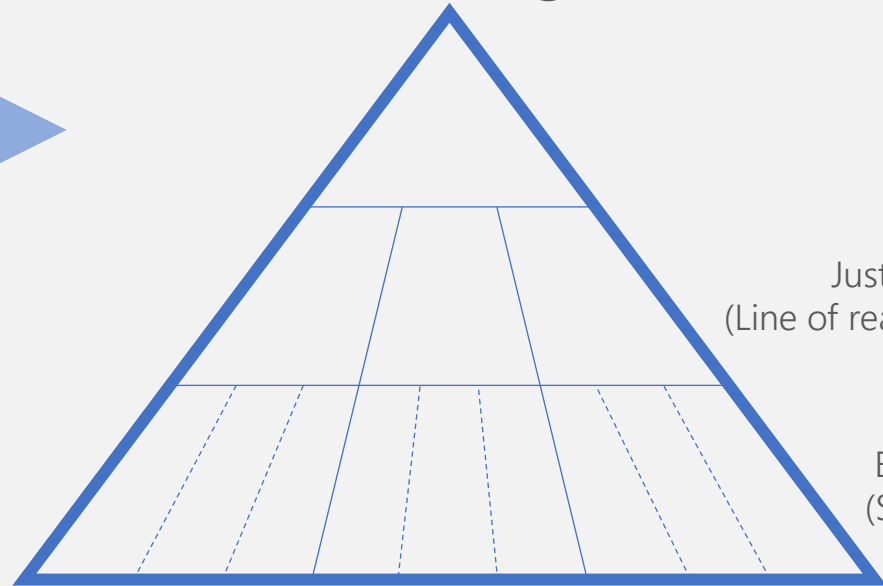
Make sure your voice is clear

- Make direct arguments
- Don't be afraid to use 'I' to position yourself in the argument
- Be clear about the arguments/theories you are in favour of and the ones you find weaknesses in

Make sure your essay responds to the question



Answer = Argument



Claim

Justification
(Line of reasoning)

Evidence
(Support)

So what ... ?

Task 2

Evaluate the two essay extracts on your handout for analysis and criticality

Note examples of descriptive, analytical and critical writing

Extract 1

Maringira (2005) proposed the concept of militarized mind in his article “Militarised Minds: The Lives of Ex-combatants in South Africa”. Even though the wars and conflicts have come to the end, ex-combatants still cling on their military status. Due to a training offered by military institution, soldiers as well as ex-combatants will have certain perspectives and beliefs which are different from civilians such as solid patriarchal belief. Furtuna (2014) suggests that men tend to use more violence than women because of biological, behavioral and evolutionary factors. Since military is a male dominated institution, the use of violence becomes conventional within the army.

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Extract 2

I want to be careful, again, here to state that I am not suggesting that queer theories on the depathologisation of affective disorders are 'mad' or irrational, or that they are 'manic' and fly off with a kind of florid excitability. What I like about Klein's theory on manic defences is that she sees the psychopathological potential in everyone and that it is necessary, in fact, for all psychosocial development and subjection. Puar's (2009) advocacy for a move to 'debility' makes similar use of the potentiality for a looming lack of ability in everyone under the spectre of neoliberalism. What I am concerned about in such theories, is that they destabilise these binaries but do not remove the negative charge associated with disablement and reduced affective capacity, and that this negative charge becomes conflated with the neoliberalist demands that are understood as framing it. Theorising from here makes pathology 'bad' as connected to a global neoliberal conspiracy that maintains a disposable workforce while simultaneously 'divest[ing] itself of responsibility for social and affective life' as it shrugs off the debilitating consequences as a medical problem (Cvetkovich 2012: 11). Agency becomes equated with a refusal of the pathologising impulses of an oppressive socio-economic system that imposes illness on vulnerable populations, and will continue to do so without social intervention. Klein is particularly useful here, because her framing of denial asks us to think about what is being left out, what we are blinded to when we use denial as an 'escape' from a state of loss (1935: 277).

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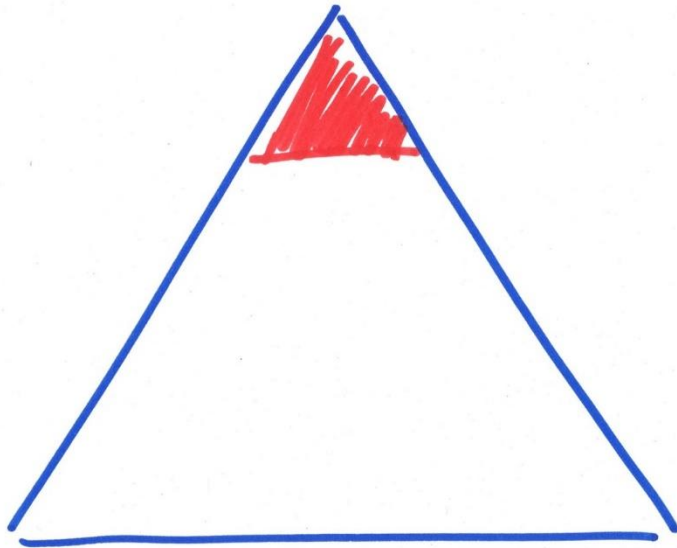
A few points about
structure

The basics

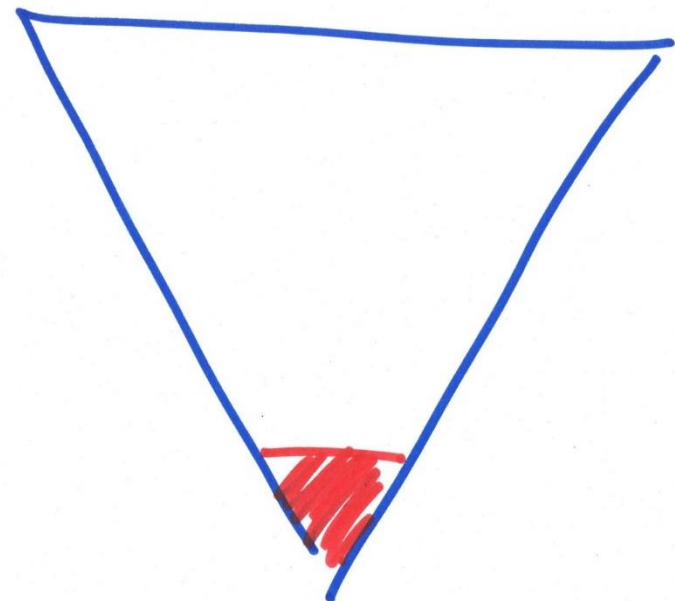
1. Word count: 10% Intro, 80% Main Body, 10% Conclusion
2. One paragraph is *roughly* 200-250 words
3. Calculate the number of paragraphs for the main body:
Divide the number of words of the main body by 200-250

Where to make your point

BRITISH
ACADEMIA



OTHER ACADEMIC
CULTURES



Introduction

Topic

- Introduce the topic of the essay question and the overall debate/question/problem/

Context

- Provide any context the reader may need to understand the question and your response
- No irrelevant historical background or excessively lengthy descriptions

Question

- Present your specific, narrowed interpretation of the question
- Explain how you define and how you will use the various terms in the question
- Draw attention to any ambiguities and implicit assumptions/assertions in the question and your views on these

Thesis statement

- Present your argument (in response to the question) concisely

Plan

- Explain how you will develop and support your answer, a “road map” of your essay

Stylized structure of a paragraph

- Topic sentence (main argument of paragraph)
- Evidence
- Explain
- (link to next paragraph)

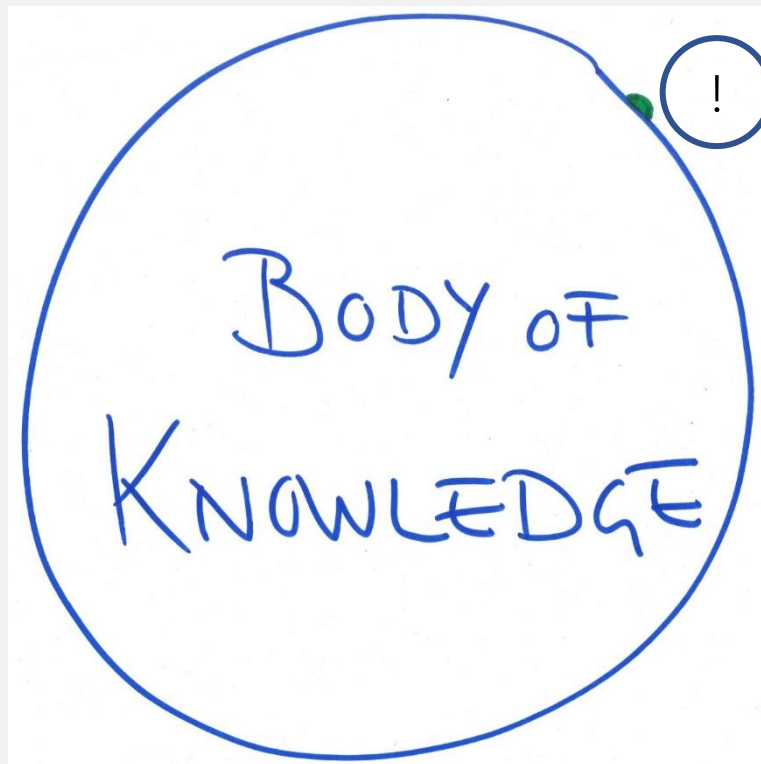
** Please note this is *not* the only way to structure a paragraph!!

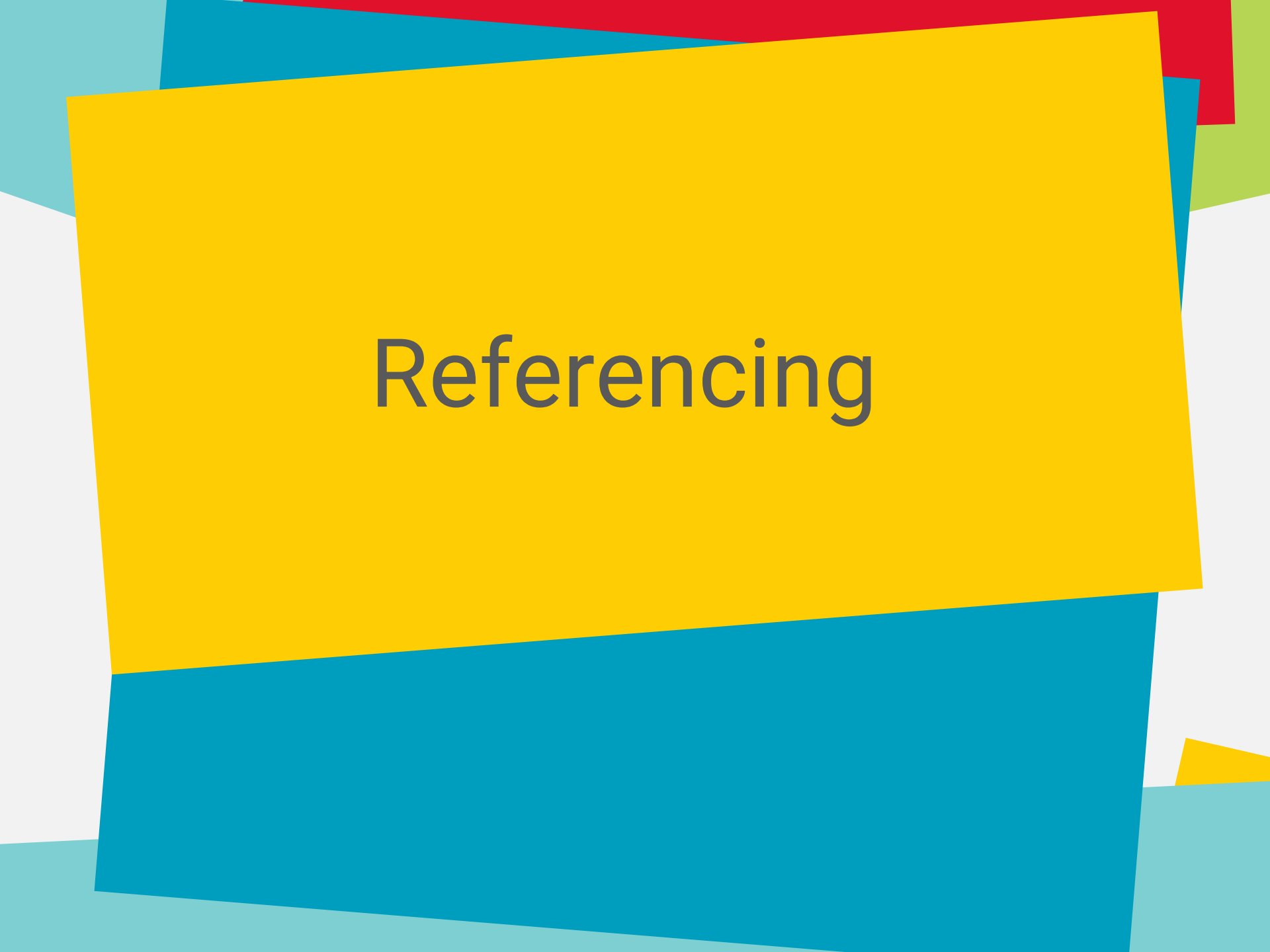
Conclusion

- Pull together the main points you've made in your essay
- Link to the 'so what?' What are the implications of this question and your answer (for the field/theory/context/people involved etc etc.)

How think about originality

Originality is a bit like giving things a (new) twist: a new or different perspective, method, data, theory ... etc.





Referencing

In 6 steps to great referencing

1 Know the three golden rules of referencing (see next page)

2 Pick a referencing standard

They have names such as APA, Chicago, MLA ... etc.

3 Obtain the manual (of the referencing standard you picked)

Many of them are available online and you will find most of your questions answered in these comprehensive manuals. [*Cite them right*](#) is a great resource (access through library catalogue)

4 Pick a referencing software (to make your life easier)

Using referencing software (e.g. Zotero, Endnote) resolves many of the formal (and formatting) questions around referencing and thus typically saves students a lot of time

5 Ready to go ...

Three golden rules of referencing

1 Give credit when using other authors' work

The first purpose of referencing is to show to your reader that you are using someone else's work (and to acknowledge the author for their work).

The second purpose is to **support/evidence** the arguments you are making, so, if in doubt, add a citation!

2 Provide your reader with the information they need so they can find the source

The third purpose of referencing is to allow your reader to locate the source you use as they may want to verify its accuracy or reuse the information themselves.

For example, if you refer to a book, but you only quote one specific sentence from this book, provide the reader with the page number to allow them to *easily locate* the information you are using.

3 When in doubt, give more information than necessary ('overcite')

For example, if you are unsure whether you should provide a page number or not, do provide it.

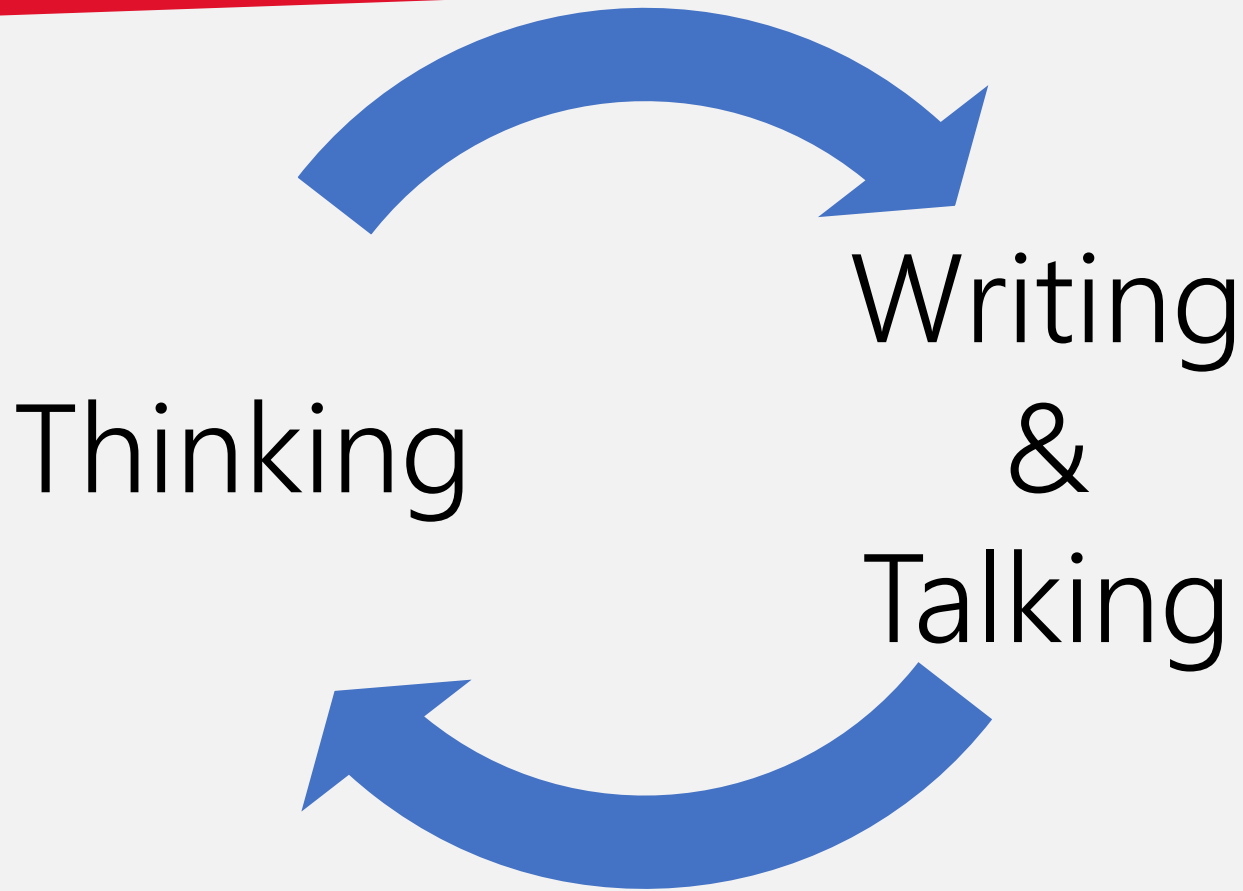
Self-plagiarism

Yes, you can plagiarise yourself!!

Don't use pieces of text from a prior essay you've written in a new one

(except when you've been explicitly told you can, e.g. if a formative task forms part of a summative assignment)

Final thoughts...



Tip: start writing and discussing your ideas early ...

Edit, edit, edit

“The only kind of writing is rewriting.”

– *Ernest Hemingway (1899 – 1961)*

Further support

Learning Lab Moodle page: materials to help you with your writing and answering essay questions.

Learning Lab one-to-ones: make an appointment with our study advisers to talk about your essays.

Learning Lab workshops: we offer a series of useful workshops for essay writing. These include:

- *Develop effective arguments in your writing*
- *Make sense of your essay question*

The Language Centre's 'English for Academic Purposes' sessions (writing and other skills) for students who don't speak English as their first language

Any questions?

Do email me or Learning Lab if you think of a question later:

learninglab@lse.ac.uk

s.taylor5@lse.ac.uk

