How to Write

Rather than write an essay on how to write an essay, which sounds like an oddly circular enterprise, we propose instead to offer a series of fuses that might help ignite your essay, or reignite your thoughts once you have written a draft of the thing.

You need help. We don’t mean this in a medical or psychiatric sense. We are not recommending the use of pharmaceutical supplements to enhance your performance. But one of the first things to realise is that a good essay involves making appropriate use of what others have said and thought. There is sometimes a tendency to suppose that you need to be original, to push others to one side, in order to have ‘your own voice’. ‘Originality’ is, after all, one of the usual criteria for a first-class essay or dissertation. But originality (if there is such a thing) doesn’t come from cutting yourself off and imagining you can work alone, like a solitary genius without books on a desert island. In the words of Ian Dury and the Blockheads, ‘There ain’t half been some clever bastards’. If you want to write good essays, read some great critics, such as William Hazlitt, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, William Empson, Lionel Trilling, Christopher Ricks or Harold Bloom. None of these writers is really a ‘theorist’, but they all have a great deal to give, both in terms of literary knowledge and insight and in terms of the art of essay-writing. Have a look at the work of perhaps the most original essay-writer who ever lived, Michel de Montaigne (1533-92). Montaigne’s essays are superbly knowledgeable and thought-provoking, as well as beautifully written. But one of the things that is most immediately striking about them is how consistently Montaigne gets help from other
writers and thinkers and how often he quotes what they have said and thought.

Montaigne himself reflects on this process, in his marvellous essay ‘On the Education of Children’:

The bees steal from this flower and that, but afterwards turn their pilferings into honey, which is their own; it is thyme and majoram no longer. So the pupil will transform and fuse together the passages that he borrows from others, to make of them something entirely his own; that is to say, his own judgement. His education, his labour, and his study have no other aim but to form this. (Montaigne 1993, 56)

Montaigne is not making an extended and eloquent plea for plagiarism, but rather suggesting that a distinctive critical voice is inevitably composed of the thoughts, arguments and inspiration of others. You should always clearly acknowledge what you are borrowing or citing, whether it is the particular words and phrases, or just the ideas or line of argument, of another critic. But the way in which you make use of what others have said and thought can be ‘entirely [your] own’. Writers are bees, quotations are flowers and the essay is honey. Montaigne implies here that the primary purpose of education is to become truly critical – to think, speak and write critically. His reference to the paramount importance of forming one’s ‘own judgement’ might remind us that the ancient Greek verb *krinein*, from which the English words ‘critic’ and ‘criticism’ come, means to judge, to discern, to cut.

**Take notes as you read.** It is crucial to annotate as you go. Intriguing, brilliant or wonderful as you might find an image or phrase or passage in Jane Austen or Ralph Ellison, in Edmund Spenser or August Strindberg, you just won’t remember
effectively without making a note of it. If it is your own book, make pencil notes in
the margins or at the back; or you can keep a running list going on a separate piece of
paper. (Annotate the book in pencil, first because you just might change your mind
about what you want and don’t want to preserve in the margins, and second because
you might want or need to sell the book someday and there are few things to buy
secondhand sadder or nastier than an old book containing someone else’s inked
defacements.) Marking up your text makes it simple to locate those moments that you
consider to be of particular interest or importance: an especially striking description
of place or of a character, a significant revelation or turn in the unfolding of the plot,
something you find notably sad, funny, imaginative, moving or strange. It might be
the phrasing of a sentence or passage, or indeed just a single word that strikes you as
interesting or notable. You may also find it helpful to keep track of particular
recurrent features, such as the repetition of a certain word or image, or the insistence
of a certain theme or idea. You might even consider developing your own
personalized system of signs, such as a capital letter (‘Q’) to note a moment that you
think might potentially be good as a quotation in your essay or, say, more specifically,
a capital ‘F’ for ‘the future’ (literary works always know their own futures and
inevitably tend to figure this at various moments) or a capital ‘L’ to indicate a
moment where the text refers to a letter someone has written. Think of your
annotations as your own personal index to the book you are reading. Return to your
annotations when it comes to essay-writing time: they are there to remind you of what
you found wonderful, intriguing, brilliant and so on. They speed up the process of re-
establishing your overall impression of the book and help you clarify what you might
want to say about it.
Write a letter. People are always writing, sending or receiving letters in literature. So-called ‘epistolary novels’, for example, are explicitly in the form of a series of letters; and poems are often, if only implicitly, in the form of some kind of letter.

When E. M. Forster gives advice on novel-writing, he says: ‘Not a bad plan to think a novel’s going to be a letter’ (Forster 1976, 162). Not a bad plan, either, to think of your essay as a kind of letter – but with a clear introduction, middle and conclusion, and without the paraphernalia of addressing someone or signing off at the end.

Thinking of your essay as a letter helps you to keep in mind the importance of the reader, and of writing in a lucid and appealing way. Montaigne’s essay ‘On the Education of Children’ was itself originally written as a letter to Madame Diane de Foix, regarding the education of her young son. (We hint at the importance of letter-writing in literature, criticism and theory with the beautiful Picasso painting on the cover of the fourth edition of Bennett and Royle.)

Answer the question (and keep answering it). Sometimes you might have an essay in which the question has been specified in advance; other times you may be expected to devise your own essay question. (For more on the latter, see ‘Devising your own essay question’, below.) Whichever it is, you need to answer the question. In your first paragraph you should briefly make it clear, first and foremost, how you are going to be answering the question. (Sounds a bit obvious, doesn’t it? But it’s quite remarkable how many essay-openings fail to do it.) Of course, ‘answering the question’ in literary studies is often far from straightforward: in a sense, literature only ever answers questions with more questions (or with silence) – that is what makes literature so endlessly fascinating, compelling, exasperating, enigmatic, exhilarating and liberating to write about. You need in your essay to try to do justice
to the uncertainties and ambiguities, to the *questioning power* of the text you are studying, as well as to provide an articulate response to the specific question or topic you are addressing.

**Say ‘I’**. Some people seem to think that there is a veto or taboo regarding the use of the first person singular in academic writing. (Admittedly we never do it, but that’s because there are two of us. Our book is written in the ‘Bennett-and-Royle we’.) This apparent veto or taboo can lead to giving the impression of some awkward and bizarre exercise in self-defence, where an essay is pervaded by formulations such as ‘In the essay it will be argued that…’, ‘Particular attention will be given to…’, ‘Having focused on… the essay will now…’, ‘In the preceding pages it has been demonstrated…’, and so on. We hereby confirm that there is nothing at all wrong with using ‘I’ in your essay-writing. The only thing you need to ensure is that you deploy your ‘I’ in a critical and judicious way. It could be said that no one is interested in your personal and private response to the text: what matters is your ability to convince people that your reading is interesting, intriguing, forceful or illuminating. Remember the importance of being lawyer- or judge-like (see below), as well as the fact that it is, after all, your essay and no one else’s. As in so much else, in essay-writing as in so-called real life, balance is crucial. You don’t want to overdo it: ‘I’ this, ‘I’ that, ‘I’ the next thing, over and over again, like any other repeated formulation, tends to become dreary. Occasional use of a more objective-sounding form (‘It may be helpful to…’), the passive (‘Particular attention will be given to…’) or indeed a first person plural form (‘As we have seen…’) creates a greater sense of variety, depth and authority.
Set things up in your opening paragraph. The opening paragraph should not only make it transparent and obvious that you are going to be answering the question, but also make it clear how, why and with what consequences. In your first paragraph, in other words, you should spell out in a direct and straightforward fashion what the question involves, what complexities or challenges it entails, and how you propose to go about dealing with these issues, with an indication of where your approach is going to take you. Bear in mind the importance of your first sentence (see ‘Your opening sentence might be your undoing’ below.) A high-quality essay will often also explicitly acknowledge and say something in its opening paragraph about the singularity and power of the literary work itself. Bear in mind that, however long your essay is supposed to be, you’re never going to be able to say everything there is to say about the text/s or writer/s you are discussing. A good essay, then, tends to establish its parameters in the opening paragraph: it describes and defines its territory and often tries to indicate at the outset aspects that will be excluded.

Connect your middle bits. Your middle paragraphs need to follow a clear path towards the conclusion that you will have already indicated in your opening paragraph. You probably won’t know exactly what your conclusion is, while you are writing the first draft of your essay. (Don’t worry: this is perfectly normal, as a doctor might say.) But when you are producing your second or final version of the essay it needs to be evident where you are going, as you go. You don’t need to treat your reader as a simpleton, but you should clearly signal what is happening from one paragraph to the next in terms of the development of your response to the question. If
you are looking for a way of getting structure into your middle paragraphs, draw up a list of the quotations you find most obviously relevant, as well as (from your own point of view as a reader) most rich and illuminating for your topic. There’s no hard-and-fast rule about this, of course, but for a 2000-word essay this might mean half-a-dozen quotations, of varying length; twelve or fifteen quotes for a 5000-word essay; and so on. These quotations can operate as goals or focal points to drive your argument forward from one paragraph to the next. Always bear in mind the importance of close reading (see our accompanying essay, ‘How to Read’): spending time trying to do justice to a particular word, line or passage from the text under consideration is crucial to a good essay. But remember, too, that close reading in itself is of limited use: you need to relate your reading of the quotation to the essay topic.

**Your concluding paragraph should worry you.** The problem with conclusions is that they can be a bit boring, since they tend to make it explicit that you have done what you said you were going to do in your opening paragraph. You don’t need to end with a bang, but neither (to recall T.S. Eliot’s formulation) do you want to end with a whimper. A strong ending usually involves at least two things: (1) it performs a sort of handshake with the essay question (recapping on how the question has indeed been the subject of the preceding pages); (2) it doesn’t simply feel like box-ticking (think of putting an extra squeeze into that handshake, add a final clinching quotation and critical comment, and/or note some way in which, given the opportunity, the topic might be explored further or in slightly different ways). In order to remain loyal to the principle of close reading and to a sense of respect for the richness and complexity of the text you have been writing about, it is often neat to end with something from the
text under consideration and especially something concerned with the ending of that
text. (See Bennett and Royle’s chapter on ‘The end’ for further thoughts on this.)

Get close, but go far. Quotation and close reading are crucial. As someone once said:
‘Quotations make the world go round.’ But don’t forget about breadth as well. Your
essay might require you to focus in detail on a play by Harold Pinter, but don’t be
afraid to draw briefly on your knowledge of, say, Beckett or Shakespeare when
commenting on a Pinter quotation. You will invariably be admired for wearing your
knowledge lightly, while nevertheless showing that you have in fact read *Waiting for
Godot* or *King Lear* and realised that it has a specific resonance or connection with
what Pinter’s play is up to.

What if you are asked to devise your own question? If it is a matter of working out
your own essay topic, make sure you word it clearly and simply. Don’t set yourself a
question that encourages a straightforward ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ or ‘Not really’ answer.
Think of a question or statement that is provoking and intriguing, but that also gives
you room for manoeuvre – an opportunity to take the topic and run with it somewhere
that you’ll find interesting and rewarding. Remember that an essay doesn’t have to be
in the form of an explicit question, and it is often best if it is short and snappy, rather
than wordy and overly explanatory. An essay title such as, say, ‘Waste in T. S. Eliot’s
*The Waste Land*’ or ‘Beckett’s “Molloy” and the Labour of Writing’ can work quite
well. On the other hand, it is often helpful to have a question or essay-title that
involves reacting to (or starting out from) a quotation, either from the author about
whose work you are supposed to be writing or from a critic (who may be named or
may be anonymous and indeed even imaginary). You might consider quoting a sentence, phrase or just a word or two from, say, Keats or Woolf or Joyce, then insert a colon, and follow this with the topic and author/text. For example: “‘To Cease Upon the Midnight with No Pain’: Death in Keats’s Poetry’ or ‘‘Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow’”: Write an essay on the word “yes” in Woolf’s To the Lighthouse’ or ‘‘What Birds Were They?’’: Figures of Flight in Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man’. Alternatively, you might find a critic who has a succinct sentence, phrase or just a word or two to say about your chosen author, text or topic: give the quotation as a separate sentence, then add a further sentence such as: ‘Discuss’ or ‘Taking this statement as a point of departure, write an essay about [specify your topic] in [specify author and/or text].’ Don’t forget that, so long as the rubric allows it, you can always adjust (or even reinvent!) your essay-title once you have a first or second draft.

Be a lawyer. When it comes to essay-writing there are numerous parallels and similarities between a literary critic writing an essay and a lawyer in a court-case. An essay is a kind of trial, not just in the funny sense of being trying. The word ‘essay’, after all, is itself from the old French verb essayer, to try or to examine, and people still use (if a little comically or pompously) the verb ‘essay’ (or ‘assay’). With an essay, as with a trial in court, there’s always an element of the unpredictable. Nothing is assured in advance. As a lawyer it may seem to you a no-brainer that the woman poisoned her husband because he couldn’t find the winning lottery-ticket, but you still have to make a case and persuade the jury. You might just mess it up and the jury decides against you or can’t make up its mind. In the same way, an essay involves making a case, and persuading your reader. What is your case? (This is another
version of ‘What are you saying?’ See below.) Outline the case in your opening paragraph. Then in the following paragraphs and pages of the essay, make your case and persuade your reader. Just as, in a trial scene, the lawyer needs evidence, so you, in your essay, need to offer evidence for what you are saying. The lawyer will provide evidence of the fact that the man was poisoned, that there really was a lottery-ticket, etc; in your case, *the evidence is the text*. You need to supply quotations from the text (or at least the precise references) in order to support and substantiate what you are saying. Where appropriate you may want to bring in further witnesses (another critic or critics) who back up your view. But the real evidence is the text itself. And, as a rule of thumb, you should never make an assertion without providing evidence. It’s not enough, however, simply to quote the text. This would be like the lawyer simply holding up a dark brown bottle and not explaining what it is or where it comes from or why it matters. You need to make it absolutely clear why you have quoted the phrase or line or passage that you have quoted. How does this quotation illustrate or substantiate your point? Comment, describe, question, analyse and elucidate.

Remember also, however, that a good lawyer not only knows how to be plain and direct, but also likes to surprise the court. If you have a really lovely bit of evidence, think about how and when you want to introduce it, in order to produce a strong effect. Sometimes you may want to hold back certain details, or conversely, you might want to dangle a certain item in front of your reader as a way of saying: I shall explain this later. Always bear in mind the importance and power of persuasion. Nice turns of phrase, resonant or memorable ways of putting things, the occasional unexpected metaphor or vivid use of an everyday idiom: these are all potentially valuable effects. But don’t strain to be clever or complicated for the sake of it.
Remember Montaigne’s remark in his essay on education: ‘Eloquence is harmful to the subject when it calls our attention to itself’ (Montaigne 1993, 80).

**Simple is elegant.**

**Don’t be afraid to experiment.** Remember that, as we have said, the word ‘essay’, like ‘trial’, has to do with experimenting. The final version of your essay needs to read *as if you knew in advance* what it was you wanted to write about and as if you knew how you were going to go about it. But everyone knows that that is not what writing is like. It’s not how people actually proceed when they write a first draft.

**Writing is discovering.** When writing is going well, it’s not necessarily because you are ‘in control’ of where it is going. On the contrary, it’s often because you have, in some sense, let go: you have let the writing take you wherever it is going. A remark by the English poet Geoffrey Hill captures this nicely: ‘I write / to astonish myself’ (Hill 2002, 23). Of course it is very often the case, if you are writing an essay in literary studies, that you are led on not so much by your own words as by the words of the writer whose work you are discussing. Some of the most pleasurable and exciting moments in writing come when you have quoted something and then start to discover things about the quotation (and connections with other quotations or other things you have been saying in your essay) as you are in the very process of writing.
Write early. Don’t wait until you have read everything there is to read on the topic you want to write about. Reading around the subject and taking notes is an important part of the process, but you may not be entirely clear about the focus of your essay when you start writing. Researching your topic and writing should not be seen as entirely separate activities, but can often proceed simultaneously or in overlapping fashion.

What are you saying? Ask yourself this question. Try to come up with an answer in the form of a single sentence. (And not a really long sentence: keep it as short and simple as possible!) You can ask yourself this before you start your reading and preparation for the essay: ‘what am I going to say?’ or ‘what do I think I am going to say?’ or ‘what do I think I would like to say?’ It’s quite probable that you don’t have the faintest idea. After all, you haven’t yet begun reading and researching. But it is still, we think, a helpful thing to do, because it becomes absolutely crucial in the later stages of composition. Ask the question again at the point when you have completed a first draft. And then ask yourself again (if you still haven’t managed to compose a single-sentence response) when you have a second or almost final draft. A good essay can always be summed up in terms of a single sentence. (Think of your reader or examiner, who has perhaps dozens of essays to grade: she will probably jot down somewhere in her notes what your essay is about. If the examiner can encapsulate your essay in a sentence, so can you!) Finding (or making up) that sentence is a bit like finding gold. Having a pithy single-sentence version of what your essay is about will then provide you with a way of refashioning or otherwise revising your draft so that it becomes quite clear and straightforward how each of your paragraphs relates to
this core sentence or idea. Every paragraph, in other words, should contain traces of that gold.

**Your opening sentence might be your undoing.** There is a funny little book called *The Exam Secret* by a man called Dennis Jackson. It was first published in 1954 but it is still in print. No doubt a principal reason for its popularity is the word ‘secret’ in the title: it’s such a seductive adjective in the context of exams which are, as we all know, public and generally feel *anything but* secret. Jackson’s book is hopelessly out of date in all sorts of ways and we would not recommend it as a guide, let alone as the godsend its title might appear to promise. But at the heart of *The Exam Secret* is a very canny and, we think, valuable bit of advice, namely to *start your essay with a strong opening sentence*. Make sure it is clear and, if possible, refreshing and distinctive. Then try to make sure the same is true of your second sentence, and your third, and so on. We would like to offer you our own exam secret: your examiner is a tired and probably rather irritable person who is looking out for a reason *not to read* or, at least, who is in danger of thinking your essay is just a continuation of the same old same old (i.e. the essay she was reading before she picked your one up). It may seem like a terrible thing to say, but the truth is it is very likely that your reader will make a judgement of the quality of your essay on the basis of your opening sentence and, beyond that, your opening paragraph. Bennett and Royle have been reliably informed of a case, at a prestigious university on the eastern seaboard of the United States, of a student in Geology who submitted a 15-page essay and received a perfectly respectable grade for his work: the first couple of pages and the last couple of pages were written as a standard sort of response on the topic, the eleven or twelve pages in the middle simply ran: ‘rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks,
rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks…’. (We are not suggesting you attempt to do this, either at home or anywhere else: see ‘Connect your middle bits’, above, and ‘Every sentence counts’, below.)

If in doubt, cut it out. Nowadays most people write their essays on a computer screen. It’s such a doddle compared with how it used to be, when an essay had to be written by hand, then revised and written out afresh, and then finally perhaps typed up. But the ease of writing, cutting and pasting on a screen comes with difficulties of another kind. In particular, writing onto a computer screen seems to encourage a sort of glazen-eyed sense that everything is ok and everything is more or less worth keeping. You might bear in mind the inverse of this idea. Again, we might recall a simple but pointed remark from Montaigne: ‘The world is all babble, and I have never met a man who did not talk more, rather than less, than he should; yet half our lives are wasted in this way’ (Montaigne 1993, 76). A good essay is a work of concision, economy and compactness, and you should fully expect that there will be bits (sometimes quite good or interesting bits) that don’t make it to the final draft. Always keep your eye on the main chance, in other words the importance of answering the essay question, developing your response, sticking to the topic. It is crucial to have a document of supplementary material when you are working on your essay, another file, that is to say, into which you can drop anything that you’re not quite sure about. If you need further encouragement on this front, think of Hélène Cixous’s incisive words in her essay ‘Writing Blind’: ‘Breaking. Cutting. Letting go. Cutting is an art I have acquired. Nothing is more natural and more necessary. All living beings, mammal or vegetable, know that one must cut and trim to relaunch life. Nip the quick. Harm to help’ (Cixous 1998, 144).
**Every sentence counts.** You should proceed on the basis that every sentence has significance and adds something to your account of the topic. At the same time every sentence should have a sort of sharpness and clarity of its own. One of the other noticeable and lamentable consequences of writing on a computer screen is that people very often don’t think ahead to the end of the sentence but go on (as in the case, alas, of the present sentence) writing in the hope that, in the end, it will all come around and, with luck, show itself to have been worth while as a further contribution, however minimal, to the essay-topic that has been assigned. The previous sentence is a case in point: it is long and unwieldy, repetitious and awkward. Writing at a computer screen seems to encourage this tendency in people. When you revise, look out for overlong sentence-structures. If you see one, sort it out. Either rework it into two sentences, or find a way of breaking it up: sometimes (as here) you can do it with a colon. This is not to say that long sentences are innately bad. Bennett and Royle, you may have noticed, contains a fair number of extended sentence-structures. It also, we would hasten to add, has a reasonable number of brief sentences. Check it out.

Deliberately varying the length of your sentences has several potential benefits: (1) it tends to be more enjoyable, unpredictable or surprising for your reader; (2) it brings rhythm (a sense of voice) more sharply into the body of your writing; and (3) it is a way of learning more about how language works, about what words can do and how syntax (the word-order and structure of a sentence) can affect or indeed entirely alter what you are saying. Silly as it may sound, reading your essay out loud is one of the most effective ways of tidying or tightening up your writing. Do it, if you can, with a friend or even, if need be, your dog or, perhaps, your friend’s dog. Hearing your sentences as you read them aloud can be the quickest way of discovering whether or
not they work. Are you satisfied with each sentence? Is it comfortable, even pleasurable(!) to read out? Could this or that sentence be somehow honed or otherwise sharpened up? Hone it. Sharpen it up. And remember: if in doubt, cut it out.

**Quote or perish.** Remember the rough rule of thumb that your comment on a quotation should be about as long as what you have quoted. If you quote ten lines from D. H. Lawrence, you should expect to spend ten lines commenting on it. (Of course if you’ve got hooked on a single sentence or a single line of poetry, don’t be surprised if you have to break the rule because you have so much you want to say.) Try to do the quotation justice: why have you chosen it? What is especially interesting, relevant, strange, thought-provoking, elegant or perhaps beautiful about it? Describe this.

**Once you have a first draft of your essay, stop!** Have a couple of drinks, or go for a run, or watch a movie: ‘unwind yourself’, as the snake in Disney’s *Jungle Book* puts it. You need to forget – or at least put at a distance – what it was you were doing. We all have some familiarity, perhaps, with the strange experience of coming across something we wrote in the past (it might be a diary, or a letter, or just an email) and thinking: ‘Did I write that? Weird!’ Getting some distance on the essay you are writing, especially once you have a first draft, can be very productive and illuminating. You can then return to it with a slightly different eye and ear, reading it a little more as if you were a stranger, rather than its anxious, possessive creator.
**Keep revising.** Always revise your work at least two or three times, preferably more. Much of what we have said above has to do with this process of revision, which should be seen as an integral part of essay-writing rather than as a bolt-on that you’ll do if you have the time or if you can be bothered. Sometimes the most interesting or exciting discoveries about your essay come only as you are reading through it for what you expect or fear or hope will be the last time. Late additions or modifications can crucially clarify and enhance the overall sharpness of your argument. Conversely, you might also see, at the very end, pleasing ways in which you can omit and tighten.

**Use a good dictionary.** Consulting a dictionary can be one of the chief delights of reading and writing: it enables you to take a pause without losing the plot. It is also a way of slowly but surely expanding your mind! Many people nowadays have the privilege of being able to access the *Oxford English Dictionary* online through a college or university library. The hard copy version of this (in the 2nd edition, published in 1989) runs to 20 hefty volumes – not exactly a handy little reference work to carry around with you! But if you have it available online, use it! It is one of the greatest publications in the world. When you look up a word, be particularly aware of four things: (1) what kind of word it is (preposition, adjective, noun, etc): realizing or confirming the classification of the word concerned can be useful when discussing it in more detail; (2) the different meanings of a given word (this may involve thinking about puns or homophones, as well as the different connotations of a word’s primary meaning): exploring a single word can fuel all sorts of ideas for writing; (3) etymology (where the word came from, especially its relation to another or older language such as French, Ancient Greek or Latin): great writers frequently mobilize or play on the etymological or, indeed, folk-etymological (i.e. fabricated or
quasi-etymological) dimensions of words; (4) the first recorded usage of a given word (the editors of the *OED* consistently give the date and first known instance of the written use of a word in the sense specified): this can be very helpful as a way of establishing or refining a sense of historical context, as well as of avoiding anachronism (for example, the first recorded use of the word ‘feminism’ in the sense of ‘advocacy of the rights of women’ is 1895: don’t expect to find avowed ‘feminist’ writing before that). In addition, or if you are not fortunate enough to have access to the *OED*, we would recommend *Chambers* as a single-volume dictionary. *The Chambers Dictionary* is wonderful for its clarity (and even occasional wit!). It is also a particularly valuable resource for the study of literature, since (unlike other single-volume dictionaries) it provides definitions of words in literary contexts (e.g. Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton).

**Have you finished?** Look over your essay and ask yourself: is it absolutely clear that I have answered the question? Is it absolutely clear that this is the case in the very first paragraph and also in the final paragraph? Is it clear how each of the paragraphs in between the introduction and conclusion constitutes an explicit development of my response to the question? Is it clear how each paragraph follows on from the last and leads on to the next? If the answer to any of these questions is ‘no’ or ‘dunno’, you need to go back to the relevant paragraph and revise it in such a way that it becomes absolutely clear how it relates to the essay question or essay topic. If you cannot see how it relates, or how to make it relate, then you need to delete the paragraph!
Enjoy yourself. A good essay gives pleasure. When you enjoy writing about the text/s or writer/s you are focusing on in your essay, this is likely to be something your reader comes to share. Thinking may be hard, expressing and structuring your ideas may be challenging and even frustrating (is anyone ever entirely satisfied with an essay they have written?), but your writing should also convey a sense of the exhilaration and playfulness of language, as well as the love of words, evident in all great works of literature.

References


