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What's the Point of a College Essay?

"To get a grade..." Well, perhaps; but perhaps rather more than that. But what?

In a cautionary piece on [Writing in the Age of ChatGPT](#), on Stanford's LitHub pages, the novelist Flannery O'Connor is quoted as remarking "I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say." In the context of academic writing, this might be restated as "I write because I then become aware that somebody else will read it and, hopefully, ask an interesting question". You begin to see it through the eyes of others, and thus become conscious of the need to take care with your words. Learning to 'contribute to the scholarly discussion' is the critical skill to acquire. Writing is a great starting point for learning such a skill.

Teaching at the college level involves scholarly discussion. You have to be very confident that you can articulate – in a two-way conversation with the class - *why* the course material is worth knowing, including the subtleties and the imperfections associated with generalities. Indeed, occasionally in early lectures and often at research seminars, perceptive observations from the audience reveal that some subtleties are, on reflection, deeper than they initially appeared, even if only in their imperfect articulation. In teaching, interesting observations may be immediately fed back to the class to provoke discussion; or they may be incorporated into future lectures. In fact, such conversations – yes, even lecturing, especially at a senior level – are deeply unsatisfactory if they do *not* involve interesting and challenging interventions.

An [earlier note](#) posed two central questions to academic staff: "Why are we asking students to write 'academically'?" Now, extending the conversation to involve students, I attempt my own answer to the *WHY* question, for this underpins the *HOW* question with which the students typically present to me when frustrated by writing, or by grades and feedback. How to answer their *HOW* question is for elsewhere; suffice to say there is much, arguably too much, guidance online; the real task is to refine this to the students who present seeking advice on Academic Writing. The second question was "Can we be sure that students have the same understanding as we do?" Regrettably, from my experience, the answer is "not always well". But the deeper questions are: What in fact *is* our understanding? How do we *communicate* this to students? And, crucially, how shall we do this in the age of ChatGPT?

My interdisciplinary answer to *WHY* is that academics use it to encourage the skill of contributing to the learning by forming perceptive or insightful questions, remarks, points and observations. Here I use the term perceptive in sense of insightful and not obvious. Such observations, if *shown to be interesting in some specific sense*, may indeed be 'scholarly contributions'. This requires a further dimension of the skill, that of *persuading the grader*, who typically knows rather more than the author of the essay, that it is indeed interesting. This in turn involves the anticipating and posing of challenging remarks and questions; crucially, this requires first that they are *self-challenging*.

Thus my answer to the *WHY* question is that it encourages the skill of self-directed learning, a prerequisite to the successful transition from answering the questions to asking them. And surely this is the one skill that students will transfer to the workplace, whether that be scholarly or professional. The speed with which the transition happens in College varies greatly across disciplines. In the Arts disciplines in Trinity, especially the classical areas of Languages, History and Philosophy, this journey is well underway already in the early undergraduate years. The STEM subjects and the professional areas move more slowly. Within all subjects, of course, ambitious and mature students are keen to move faster.

These are not entirely novel ideas, but they are novel to many students. In a sense they are also novel to me, for I have not spent a career teaching students how to write, for that is not in the tradition of teaching Statistics. In that sense, the exercise of writing this has been useful, to me, and hopefully to some students.

Perceptive observations

These do not need to be earth shattering. It may, in the early years, simply involve 'getting an angle' on some aspect of the brief for the assignment. The aspiration is that they contribute to the study and discussion of the course. They may perhaps reappear in class discussion, in the lectures next year, or even in an exam. The essay – whether a humble lab report, a reflexive essay, a critical essay, or even a PhD - is a vehicle. The brief usually asks the student – sometimes implicitly - to confront a theory, methodology or framework with a specific instance or example.

Examples are necessarily discipline specific, and for the current purpose must be simple. I begin with one small and very structured example, by no coincidence close to my own discipline. A UG student of Biochemistry presented me with her poorly graded lab report; most helpfully, she also offered her friend's report. She had conducted a series of 30 experiments, measuring two variables. Formally, she was confronting a theory, that the two variables were correlated, with the reality of a lab experiment. *Inter alia*, she summarised a 'pattern' with a correlation coefficient reporting a value of 0.230607. Why six significant figures (decimal places), I asked. Because, she said, that's what EXCEL reported! She showed me her friend's report. In contrast there, with different but similar data, the value was given as 0.21, and it was remarked that this was 'low'. Why did the friend get a better grade for this section of report?

By showing critical awareness, I told her. Firstly, by *failing* to recognise the *spurious precision* implicit in the use of six significant figures, she had exposed her own naivety and lack of critical awareness; her own measurements (the data) were recorded with two significant figures. Secondly, her friend, by remarking that her computed figure was 'low', had indeed made a perceptive observation. Indeed, to the statistician, it was so low as to question the value of the experiment as designed for the class. However, I remarked, the friend did not indicate awareness of why, or in what sense, or with what implications, it was perceptive. More precisely, she had not *persuaded me* that she was so aware. I thus felt that her friend could have gained an even better grade in this part of the report. I suspected that the grader, whose opinion was more important than mine – was also unpersuaded.

A similar example arose with a graduate student in Environmental Science. Here she had used advanced software to study the impact on Dublin of a 3-metre storm surge, and had produced a map of the areas most affected. Her map showed that Howth would become an island, and that many of the coastal suburbs would suffer great damage, which she detailed. But it also seemed to show that some south Dublin suburbs, including Sandyford where I live, would be flooded. This surprised me, for we are at 100m above sea level in the foothills of the Dublin mountains! She had

not commented. But why should she, an international student, know this? Nevertheless she also had missed an opportunity for a perceptive and critical remark.

An example of a potential angle arose from a very different conversation with a first-year nursing student. One aspect of her task was to write about the role of a nurse in dealing with patients with alcohol dependence. I asked her to tell me something that I, or (better) others in the class, might not know: where, for example, might a nurse encounter such a patient? She thought for a moment, and then suggested 'an ante-natal clinic'. Expectant mothers know the dangers of alcohol, but some struggle; and the intimate setting of an ante-natal clinic allows some to discuss the struggle. An angle, perhaps, with which to approach her assignment? Might it illuminate her thinking, and perhaps that of others, on aspects of the general issue?

Finally, a very interesting remark from a confident second year student of English. He remarked that two novels – *Black Beauty* (1887) by Anna Sewell, and *War of the Worlds* (1897) by H.G.Wells – both involved non-human intelligence. This was surely an interesting reflection of the impact of Darwin's recent and provocative theory (*On the Origin of Species*, 1859) that humans were just another species? But is this student's remark not just 'an opinion'? And surely opinions are inadequate in academic writing, as many students assure me they have been told. But not if argued, I tell them, as discussed below; 'considered opinions' are precisely what is sought.

In most subjects, of course, scholarly remarks such as this last are more likely to arise in conversations with senior and graduate students, in that they are commonly based on a wide reading, and searching, of the literature, including the research literature. Thus, although one of the roles I play is that of the Study Buddy, I rarely have the specialist knowledge for deep conversations. But I can nevertheless prompt productive discussion.

Why persuasion?

So what *is* the point of the College essay? I argue above that the point of *writing* such an essay is to help acquire certain scholarly skills. But, as I argue below, the essay, having been written, needs to *make a point* equivalent to: *Something is interesting in a specific sense relevant to this course*. In the more formal language of scholarly writing, such a point is often described as the *claim*, or the *thesis statement*; in the language of argumentation, the claim in the thesis statement is *the point to be argued*. The claim differs thus from a mere opinion, if argued; it can be termed a *considered opinion*. Of course, many literary devices other than *claim/point/statement* are available, including the rhetorical question.

What is persuasion in a College essay? Philosophers from the time of Aristotle tell us, according to Wikipedia, that there are [three](#) styles of persuasion: Ethos, Pathos, and Logos - meaning by authority, by emotion and by methods using argumentation via logical reasoning and evidence. This last is the style favoured in academe, for logic and evidence can be challenged, unlike authority and emotion. Thus it is that in all disciplines, knowledge, or received wisdom, is overtaken by the next generation when they, in their turn, have graduated from the *answering* to the *asking* of hard questions. Argumentation and persuasion is where they learn this skill.

Importantly, the more subtle the claim, the more challenging it is to find the evidence and logic to support it. Thus the claim that *idea A is more interesting than idea B* can be more subtle than *idea A is interesting*; and similarly with *idea A is more interesting in this sense than it is in that sense*. Thus the more challenging the claim, the harder it is to argue and the greater is the reward. Thus, in the example above, the claim that "The success of these books is a clear reflection of the impact of

Darwin's ideas" is much stronger than that quoted above, and rightly requires much stronger evidence than is available in the fact that two books were published.

A further skill is that of counter-argumentation. For it is to be anticipated that the reader for whom it is written will also be capable of asking perceptive questions, and this should therefore be planned for. Claims that a perceptive point is 'interesting' are relatively simple to make. But experience tells that many simple claims fall at the first hurdle. Self-challenge is key to counter-argumentation.

However, such skills – in, for example, challenging what may be inadequate evidence and faulty logic, and in counter-arguing – are not innate. Nor are they taught, in the abstract, in most disciplines. Nor even are the skills always described in a language that is common across all disciplines. The double-negative, for example, is widely misunderstood, even by professionals. As evidence, I recommend both Google and Google Scholar(!) searches for the sentence "The role of technology cannot be underestimated". To me, it often seems that logic is absorbed, not taught.

Vital to all disciplines is the synthesis and critical evaluation and of whatever stands for evidence; evidence should always be questioned. Thus some students are taught early to distinguish primary and secondary sources of evidence. As mentioned the earlier [note](#), in History, that sub-discipline is called 'historiography'. In some disciplines, for example, philosophy, mathematics and more generally the quantitative disciplines, logical reasoning and its specialist versions of theory and proof are explicit and formal and arise from *axioms*. In mathematics and philosophy, for example, persuasion *other than* by logical argumentation is almost an oxymoron! In Mathematics, examples are an important part of persuasion, to be sure, but as illustrations not evidence. Yet in many disciplines a good example seems to sufficient for (a version of) persuasion. Thus, what *counts* as evidence and argumentation is discipline specific.

Importantly, by acknowledging the necessity of persuasion in the writing, the author can increase the level of the self-challenge, and thus degree of critical thinking, by refining and strengthening the point to be argued. This takes the learning well beyond the simple and passive memorisation of facts and the search for the right answer. It leads in fact to *active* learning. How could a teacher possibly learn to teach subtleties without the active challenge of delivering a course to a critical class; or a mechanic without building an engine, or a scholar without building an argument? How better to prepare for an exam?

Thus, when a student offers me a draft, I typically ask them to reflect on their learning. I ask them to tell me the most satisfying and interesting *new* thing that they have learnt from the self-challenging exercise of writing. In some cases, in particular reflexive essays and even lab reports, where theory confront practice, this is an explicit objective of the exercise; but it is always implicit. Then, reminding them that their writing is a contribution to a discussion, I ask them to consider another student, perhaps next year, facing the same essay prompt. What, in the light of what they have learnt from writing this essay, would they recommend to that student as an interesting starting point? And, where and how have they mentioned these things in the current draft?

Together, these answers capture the *WHY* aspects of the essay. They also colour the *HOW* in times of change.

How to Write the College Essay

The *HOW* of essay writing involves both: substantive issues, the perceptive remark and its implications; and editorial issues, including structure and flow. Naturally, the constraints of space

and time require judgement calls on what survives redrafting; and this often involves a refinement of the underpinning ideas. But judgement can itself be a critical skill.

There are two sources of *HOW* advice to the student. The first, and most important, is the advice from those who set the essays; this focusses on the ideas, the evidence and the logic of persuasion. Some is explicit, in remarks to the class as a whole and in the personal advice given to students who have the confidence to knock on doors, as I always advise. And of course some comes via people like me in student support units. But much of it comes in grades earned and in feedback associated with issues that have led to marks being lost.

Unfortunately, high-stakes grading of in-term assignments (now the norm) is a double edged-sword. One consequence of high-stakes grading is that it can inhibit the giving of useful one-on-one advice. For example, some students report that issues of parity are sometimes cited in inhibiting the exploration, with the lecturer, of the choice between 'angle options' for the essay: "It would be unfair on other students" to go down this route with an individual student.

Another aspect of such grading is that it is onerous. First impressions are thus important. Difficulties with structure and flow can mean that the grader struggles to grasp the underlying ideas and to give constructive feedback on these. The flow problems most distracting to the grader are simple, line editing issues, spelling, grammar, syntax and citation; and next are poorly constructed sentences and paragraphs. For many graders and students, feedback is dominated by such boring low-level editorial issues. Strangest of all, to many students, are errors in citation conventions that are arguably arcane. One student asked to talk about the use of '&' in place of 'and' in citations. In the [earlier note](#), I quote an example from an ambitious and mature, yet frustrated, first-year History student. How, she asked, was she meant "grow academically" with such feedback?

Some feedback is of course substantive, and directly addresses the learning issues addressed under *WHY*. Cited work may be misunderstood or misreported; important work may have been overlooked; there may be logical fallacies such as the statistician's favourite - correlation confused with causation. But these are time consuming for a busy grader; and shorthand terms, such as 'more criticism please', can be opaque to the student.

But, in the Age of ChatGPT?

But how much of this will survive in the in the age of Generative AI and in particular, of recent developments focussed at academe, including research, such as the ChatGPT plugin ScholarAI?

Major changes are coming; most welcome this. Clearly it promises to raise the standards, for staff as well as students, as indeed have many past developments. The boring parts, for staff and students, will continue to simplify. No-one now yearns for the days when essays were submitted in longhand script, without checks on spelling and grammar. Missing and repeated words will be fewer, as will howlers from AutoCorrect, a precursor of GenAI. Web searching via the likes of Google Scholar is already indispensable; indeed it has led to [Systematic Reviews](#) becoming the norm in the Health sciences projects, even at undergraduate level.

But surely searching by word and phrase will very soon be recognised as crude, being replaced by natural language searching facilitated by the coming generation of search engines: "Tell me something most students don't know about ..." More interesting again is generating summaries of a body of work in several papers. But, even more than with old fashioned searching, the responses should be treated sceptically, for they are presented *so plausibly*.

Minimally Gen AI will raise the game for essays; more students will identify possible perceptive points, helped by AI systems in CoPilot or Study Buddy mode; and those charged with grading will rightly spend more time challenging them through more detailed constructive feedback. Indeed staff will also explore AI systems for assistance with that grading and feedback. In fact, this expectation applies well beyond essays. Students of mathematics and computing also write, and Gen AI also [has a role there](#). Crudely put, and echoing aspects of [a discussion of teaching and exams at secondary level](#), the “boring parts” of both teaching and learning can make room for “educators to design assessments that test how students think”. But this in turn requires a more explicit focus on articulating the deeper aspects of learning.

But change also brings anxiety. And all are aware that global academe is indeed a stage close to paralysed panic. Currently this expresses itself in anticipated ‘copy-and-paste’ threats to Academic Integrity, both in the work of students and staff. Minimally, students need to consult within their discipline, for guidance. But things are changing, and rapidly; another source of difficulty. For example, Grammarly (which now includes AI) advertises a paraphrasing service as a way of avoiding plagiarism; implicitly this avoids the ‘difficulties’ of Turnitin. This is a small example of another ‘arms race’ that we all foresee, knowing full well that it will not resolve all the uncertainty and may have unintended consequences.

For in-term essays, experimentation with new ways of learning would seem to be much simpler if essay grading were to be ‘low-stakes’; that is to say, earning only a low proportion of the marks for the module. Then everyone, students and staff, could experiment and focus on the important issue – that of learning, now helped by Gen AI. There would be no incentive to game the system. But, without grades, would students embrace this? Interestingly, as discussed in a provocative paper “On the assessment arms race and its fallout” ([Harland et al, 2014](#)), the main driver of high-stakes grading is student led. There, the term ‘arms race’ is used to refer to the competition between staff to attract students to their courses! “If I didn’t offer in-term grades, they would just take another course”.

To make progress, it seems to me that a necessary requirement for progress is that staff and students share not only a college wide policy such as [that of KU Leuven](#), but further – and much more challenging - share a common articulation of the basic learning objectives of essay writing. There is clearly a need for a sustained period of ‘institutional learning’.

But this may not be sufficient to assure student ‘buy-in’. Discipline level reinforcement of the policy must be seen consistently, in the design of essay prompts, including grading schemes and rubrics. But it will also be needed in the systems for generation of grades and the feedback that students will receive, and in the review of those systems.

I close, as often in academic writing, with a refinement of the question. When using high-stakes grading, what is the point of a college essay?