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Seven Steps to Excellent
Essays and Assignments

Mal Leicester & Denise Taylor

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Originality



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Introduction

Imagine that you are the assessor. You face a large pile of essays to be marked. They all say much the same things, drawing on the same material and putting forward the same arguments. Assessment becomes a repetitive and a rather boring task. It certainly adds interest when you come across an essay which has a fresh perspective or some new ideas or arguments or, simply, some striking examples or insights. A touch of originality is likely to gain you some marks. This does not mean that you must have the originality of



one of the great thinkers such as Einstein, Newton or Kant. To be original in your essay simply requires a fresh element, however small. In this chapter we will explore these elements. In other words, we will show you several ways in which you could bring a touch of originality to your work. You do not need to use every one of these ways in each essay. Sometimes you will have been original without thinking about this by drawing on a paper or a research project when no-one else in your cohort has discovered it, or its relevance has not been recognised.

Form Your Own Point of View

We have already seen that forming your own point of view goes hand in hand with critical thinking. Having a new point of view makes for a very original essay. However, you must present a plausible viewpoint and justify it with reasons, argument or evidence. It is also perfectly acceptable to agree with the point of view of the essay question, or one of the main thinkers, provided that you acknowledge this and give a reason for accepting it. This reason is your own and in itself brings an element of originality to the essay, as well as demonstrating that you have a point of view and that it is a reasonable and justified one. It may be that you can amend the established viewpoint, in a small way, or that you can add to it. Such modifications or additions also bring in an original element. For example, in the sample essay on critical thinking in Chapter 4, the writer developed a conception of critical thinking such that part of this was identical to the conception of the main thinker, Brookfield, but which had some well-supported additions. Thus, the student properly answered the essay question, and also, at the same time developed their own original point of view.

Use Your Professional Experience

If you are a mature student, you may well have relevant work experience to draw on. Use this. It is an advantage not shared by the younger students. For example, a mature student on a Certificate of Education course may have been a classroom support worker. They will have considerable relevant experience of, for instance, hearing the children read.

Drawing on existing professional experience is particularly useful for students who are on a course for professional development, where previous experience will similarly be directly relevant. Thus, a nurse on a professional development module drew on her own recent experience as a patient. Her essay was about combining a caring approach with professional detachment

and she highlighted several small gestures on the part of her nurses that made her feel listened to and less alone, and, simultaneously, she felt herself to be in capable hands.

Use Your Voluntary Work

The student coming to university straight from school or college, and certainly after a gap year, may have relevant experience from their voluntary work or interesting hobbies. You can draw on this for reasons, arguments and examples. For example, your voluntary work at a youth centre may be relevant to an essay about youth work. Or your experiences in Africa, during your gap year, may be relevant to an essay about developing countries.

Many students have experience of voluntary work, which is becoming an advantage when they apply for a place at university. This experience can often be used to enhance an essay. For example, a student helping out at a self-help group for families with children who had Tourette Syndrome used her experiences with the group in an essay on voluntary work. Another student used his experience of visiting speakers to a voluntary group in an essay on community education.

Use Your Personal Experience

Your own personal and family experience may be relevant to some essays. For example, you may have a severely disabled sibling and your essay may be on special education, and your family experience may be relevant. One student, in an essay on disability and the family, drew on her own experience of growing up as the sibling of a severely disabled brother. She also drew on the literature to demonstrate that her own experience was shared and recognised. This personal (yet supported) material added interest and an original element. Another student, writing an essay on institutional racism, used her previous work for an anti-racist organisation in Handsworth, Birmingham to telling effect. She anonymised her case study notes to provide real life examples of the negative effects of institutional practices on individuals who had sought assistance from her organisation. These examples were particularly interesting because they were presented as drawn from real life, but since their point was to illustrate and explain institutional racism in practice, their anecdotal nature did not invalidate this original material.

If you draw on your own experience in producing an argument or theory or in developing your own point of view or in the reasons and evidence and examples that you provide, then this material will be fresh and original.

Your experience is not identical to that of your fellow students. By drawing on your experience the material becomes, in this respect, different from the material in the essays in the rest of the pile. However, personal experience will not be appropriate in some essays. For example, it would not be appropriate in an essay requiring you to identify and evaluate the objective evidence on a topic. If you are unsure, discuss this with your tutor.

Although drawing on your own experience can bring a fresh note to your essay, be careful not to overgeneralise. One family's experience does not establish a universal truth. In general, your own experience is not sufficient to fully justify an argument or, on its own, support a claim. However, it can be used to illustrate a point or to provide a telling example.

Similarly, a brief and well-chosen anecdote may make for interesting illustrative material, but anecdotes should not be overused or used to overgeneralise. They are not an accredited source of knowledge. Look at the anecdote used in *The Meaning of Words* below. In fewer than 80 words an anecdote is used which is interesting and directly relevant. It actually illustrates a problem with the theory being rejected by Wittgenstein, and fits the new theory he went on to develop. This anecdote also provides variety and structure in an otherwise highly abstract piece. Thus, there were several reasons to include it. The point is that anecdotes can certainly enliven and individualise your work, but you must ensure that they are concise, relevant, illuminating and intrinsically interesting.

Sample Anecdote

The Meaning of Words

Do you wonder, as a writer, how the words you choose and set on the icy page carry meaning to your reader? The great modern philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, gave two very different accounts of how words are meaningful. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), he set out, in clear and logical detail, what one might call the commonsense explanation, the picture theory of meaning. A word's meaning is the object for which it stands. The word paper stands for this object in my hand, from which I am reading. The sentence, 'the paper is in my hand' is meaningful by picturing a possible fact in the world, the position (in) of the object (paper) and another object (hand).

Some years later Wittgenstein bumped into a colleague and asked about a mutual acquaintance. The man brushed his own chin. That gesture, in that part of that country at that time, meant that their mutual acquaintance was a 'cuckold'. That is to say, the man's wife was, unknown to her husband, being unfaithful to him. 'Oh, Oh!' thought Wittgenstein, 'My theory of language must be wrong. How can a simple gesture picture such a complex set of facts in the world?'

Wittgenstein then developed his very different theory of meaning, worked out and conveyed in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). The meaning of a word (or gesture) lies in its use – its role in an established human practice, what Wittgenstein called a ‘language-game’.

The *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* are as different in style as they are in ideas about language. The *Tractatus* is orderly and logical and spare with the beauty of a skeleton. The *Philosophical Investigations* is vivid, eclectic, full of metaphor and images with the deliberate repetitions of often approaching the same place from a variety of directions. Both books have been enormously influential.

Use Fresh Material

When you and your fellow students are given an essay title, most of you will draw on the same material in constructing your answer. You will have been given the same reading list. You will have attended the same lectures and taken part in the same discussions. It will not be surprising, therefore, if much of the material you produce in your essays is similar. Some students will draw on the literature more fully, will produce a more coherent essay structure and take a more critical stance than will other students. Nevertheless, the material being structured and critiqued is broadly the same material across the cohort of students. Your essay will gain a considerable original edge if, in addition to the standard and probably essential material, you can also include some fresh material of your own.

For example, you may have come across a book, or part of a book, or a paper, or a professional journal, or a newspaper article which, though it is not on your reading list, is both highly relevant to your essay and creditable. If you use this fresh material in conjunction with the material your tutor expects you to show that you know about, then you will have added something original to your essay.

You may also come across relevant additional ideas from a non-literature sources. For example, you may see a link with material from a different module. Or you might watch a relevant and well-produced TV documentary or watch related TED Talks videos which often include presentations by renowned experts across a wide range of subjects.

Presentations that have been recorded or produced digitally using software such as SlideShare and shared on social media platforms like LinkedIn may also provide supplementary sources and information. Experts and academics often use these digital tools. In the business world, for example, leadership and marketing experts such as Seth Godin, Arianna Huffington, Sheryl Sandberg, Anthony Robbins, Marissa Mayer, Belinda Gates and Guy

Kawasaki all use digital tools to share and promote their work. Be mindful of applying the criteria of credibility and reliability, however, when using these additional or complementary sources.

Be alert for such additional inputs and connections.

Use New Perspectives, Insights, Links and Combinations

Occasionally, and especially when you are particularly interested in the essay subject, you may be gifted with a reorientation of thinking which produces a new perspective for your essay. This will make for an original piece of work. Be careful to show that you do know and understand the established perspective. In a more minor key, without needing a complete perspective transformation, you may, nevertheless, have a new insight or make a new link or create a new amalgam.

A particular insight while doing an MA led to Mal's PhD area. This insight was: 'Even God's view of the world is relative to a consciousness, namely God's'. This insight led Mal to consider different forms of relativism and the implications of these for multicultural education. To what extent are forms of thought and value judgements relative to a cultural context and which elements, if any, are valid in any context?

A link with Bourdieu's notion of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), made by a student doing an essay about a mental health forum, enabled her to reconcile two apparently conflicting aims of the forum: self-help for the individual member on the one hand, and facilitating social change on the other. This added to the criticality of the essay by bringing in and exploring the notion of social capital, and since this was the only essay to make this link, it added some originality:

Moreover, the notion of social capital can reconcile two underlying aims of the forum which in some contexts are seen as in opposition. The forum network aims to help the individuals who form it, a distinctively person-centred approach. It also aims for social change to improve policy and practice for those with mental health issues. **Individual** mental health needs are addressed through mutual self-help in the forum, but also their **collective** voice is used in pursuit of social improvements in mental health policy and provision.

Sample Essay: *Cultural context influences engineering practice:* *Discuss*

The following text is part of an essay. The student began with some analysis of 'cultural context' and 'engineering practice'. He went on to identify several ways in which cultural factors had influenced engineering designs. Notice, however, that in the section of the

essay quoted, the examples given of differences between US and Western European designs help us to understand the point being made. They also bring some originality to the essay because different engineering students would choose different examples.

Extract

It is often assumed that engineering practice transcends cultural influence; that the best engineering practice will emerge from the interface between the engineering problem and the real world, mediated by mathematical models and physics (the constraints of the real world). However, culture and engineering interact such that engineering, over time and between societies, is influenced by cultural context.

In the USA, the emphasis is often on simplicity, reliability, and cost effectiveness. It was in the USA that the idea of a single water tap in the middle of the sink for both hot and cold water first came into being. In Western Europe the emphasis tends to be on the product being elegant and a pleasure to use. This is very apparent in the recent spate of new designs of elaborate and expensive cork removers for wine bottles that are appearing in our shops.

Some might say that such differences are the product of fashion. However, unlike dress, furniture or buildings some engineering work is rarely, if ever, seen. Inside the average American car is a large, simple, reliable engine, with bland and boring characteristics. Inside the average European car is a small, highly-tuned responsive engine that delights the driver by its responsiveness. The number of broken down vehicles that often used to be seen on European motorway hard shoulders was a testament to the resulting lack of reliability. Something in the European culture led engineers and users to choose a design that was less reliable than it could be for the pleasure derived from its use. Similarly, cultural factors influence the relative weighting given to considerations of the risk versus the expense of a particular design solution.

Well expressed. You convey complex ideas very clearly. You introduce the claim that in spite of the constraints of the real world, on engineering tasks, cultural factors influence engineering solutions.

Useful examples.

To discount the influence of fashion, the choice of hidden car engines contrasting with clothes furniture and buildings is a good choice. It illustrates your point clearly.

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Even in an apparently hard-edged practice like engineering we see that there isn't just one solution, but a family of best solutions, and which of these we prefer will be partly conditioned by cultural factors. For instance, an electrical connection from a shore based mains power supply to a ship in a western dockyard is by a very large electric plug and socket. In the Russian dockyards there is no plug and socket and the connection is by individual wires with each one poked into a screw terminal. Either solution is equally efficient.

The case for the influence of cultural factors is well made by citing cultural factors influencing choice from a family of best solutions. This is followed by an effective example. Well done.

Negative and Positive Approaches

You may produce a competent essay and gain a pass mark. To achieve a high grade, however, you need something extra, such as the criticality discussed in the last few chapters or a touch of originality as explored in this one. Without this extra ingredient you could gain comments such as the following:

Sample Negative Comments

- This is a competent, if unexciting essay.
- Some interesting illustrations or examples would have made your points clearer and at the same time would have enlivened the essay.
- You do not say why you agree with Brookfield.
- You could have made good use of the interesting and relevant experience that you described in our group discussions.

In this chapter we have looked at ways in which you can give your essay or assignment an element of originality. This does not mean you need an outlandish viewpoint or a revolutionary new breakthrough idea. An arresting example, an unusual but reasonable argument, or drawing on your own experience will all add an interesting difference and can gain you some extra marks and some positive comments such as:

Sample Positive Comments

- The examples you use are useful and interesting.
- The professional experience you draw on adds much to your essay.

- Your point of view is unusual but well supported. Well done.
- Your original perspective on the controversy is useful, arresting and convincing. A very good piece of work.

Brief Exercises



Practise Some Original (Lateral) Thinking

Think of 10 different ways of using each of the following: a brick; a book; a cup; a pen; a biscuit.

Original Elements

Write down two ways in which your essay can demonstrate originality.

Feedback is given in Appendix 4.

Conclusion

We have looked at some of the ways in which you can ‘lift’ your essay from the ‘pile’ by bringing in an original element. Provided this original material is included in addition to, rather than instead of, the material you are expected to discuss, and provided it is relevant, it will usually enhance your essay. However, if you are unsure that the material you want to use is appropriate, you could discuss this with your tutor before using it.

Do not overuse the techniques discussed in this chapter and do not over-generalise or over claim. However, original ideas, fresh points of view and personal examples will often be part of the most interesting work.

Summary of Key Points

1. A touch of originality in your essay adds interest and could therefore gain you additional marks.
2. You do not have to have the originality of Einstein. A fresh element, such as a good example from your own experience, can enliven your essay.
3. Having your own point of view is important in an essay. It may be more or less original but should always be well supported. Or it may be that you can provide a new argument in support of an established point of view. Or your originality could simply be in the form of having modified the existing view in a fresh way.

(Continued)

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4. You may have professional, personal or voluntary work experience that is relevant to your essay. Drawing on this will bring new material into your essay.
5. A well-chosen, brief anecdote may provide an interesting illustration. Do not overuse this as evidence in support of a claim but use it to illustrate what you are saying.
6. Most students who have been set the same essay title will be drawing on the same reading list and lectures. Your answers will all be similar and may become a bit boring for the assessor. Fresh relevant material, added to that which you are expected to show that you are familiar with, will add interest/originality.
7. Fresh material could be from a book or article not on your reading list but which is nevertheless relevant and creditable.
8. You may see a relevant link with material from another module which you are taking, or have taken.
9. You may be gifted with a fresh insight or with that reorientation of thinking which will give you a new perspective on your essay.
10. Simply drawing on your own experience is likely to produce different reasons and different examples from those of others in your group, because they have different experiences.
11. Personal experience alone is not evidence for a claim but could be used to illustrate a point. It is not appropriate for all essays. If in doubt, discuss this with your tutor.
12. Any one of these ways of bringing in a new element to your essay will give some originality. You do not need to use all of them in one essay!

For chapter exercise feedback, further reading ideas and more tips on polishing your assignment, check out the appendices at the back of the book.

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