The Australian National University

POLITICAL SCIENCE, SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Essay Writing Guide

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INTRODUCTION

This guide is divided into three major parts. In the first we explain simply how to analyse a question, how an essay is structured, how to reference and construct a bibliography, and how to avoid plagiarism. The second provides some useful tools for those wishing to develop essay preparation skills, and covers areas such as reading strategy, making notes, writing and rewriting, and style. The final part of the guide provides information on alternative forms of referencing, the grading system, the Academic Skills and Learning Centre and ANU guidelines on non-sexist Language.

PART A - BASICS

I. ANALYSING THE STRUCTURE OF AN ESSAY QUESTION

The essence of good essay writing is to be found in the *quality of your argument* and the *level of analysis*. The essay must go beyond description and narrative. It is not enough just to tell a story, nor is it enough just to produce a large number of facts related to the topic of your essay, nor is it enough merely to recount what the authors of the textbooks have to say about the topic. The essay should represent your *considered perspective* and your *informed thoughts* on the problem you have been asked to write about. Of course, you cannot begin to construct a considered perspective or to develop informed thoughts unless you first have a firm understanding of the subject matter. So the first step is reading intensively and acquiring a grasp of both the factual material and the arguments, debates, and differences between those scholars who have contributed to the literature on the subject. Having done that, you are then in a position to *analyse the issue* and *develop your own argument.*

An *argument,* in its basic sense, is a statement, supported by adequate empirical evidence or logical inference, which addresses the question and presents a point of view or a perspective on that question. The quality of the argument will be measured by how persuasive it is, and its persuasiveness will be a function of the skill with which you have constructed that argument.

Once you have chosen your essay topic (or perhaps even as part of the process of choosing your topic) it is helpful for you to begin by thinking about what the question means and what you are being asked to do. Eventually this will become ‘second nature’ to you, but you might think about approaching the task in this way.

We have given you an example here from a first year Political Science question.

‘Does Australia have a pluralist political system?’

First, you should identify the **broad topic or subject** of the question (this may seem obvious but it is a good starting point). In the example given, the broadly defined topic is - Australia’s political system.

Second, you need to identify the more **specific focus** of the question - in this case, the focus is the *nature* of Australia's political system. Is it pluralist or (and the other part of the question is implicit) is it something other than pluralist?

Third, you need to think carefully about any **directions** you are given in the question. For example, here you are being asked 'does Australia have ...' which means that there is a specific question that you will have to provide an answer for. Your answer might be yes (in which case you would have to say why), no (and again, you would have to say why, and then explain how you would characterise the political system), or perhaps something that suggests that Australia's political system is predominantly pluralist, but with features that are not pluralist - and you would have to say what they are - or something that suggests that Australia's political system is not really pluralist (and therefore what it is) but has some pluralist features.

There are often other kinds of directions - 'discuss', 'evaluate', 'analyse', 'examine', 'critically review', 'compare and contrast'. You need to think about what these words mean - if you are unsure, then we suggest you consult chapter five of John Clanchy and Brigid Ballard, *Essay Writing for Students*.

Fourth, you will need to identify what you think are the **key terms** that you will need to address in your essay and in developing your argument. Remember that at all times you will need to support your answer with an argument, rather than simply making assertions. In the case of the example we have given you, you would need to understood what was meant by 'political system' (for how can you develop an argument about the political system if you don't know what it is) and you will also need to show that you understand what 'pluralist' means (for again, how can you construct an argument that Australia's political system is or is not pluralist, if you don't know what this terms means).

II. OUTLINING

Once you have 'unpacked' your question, it is helpful to think about how you might structure an essay which will provide a comprehensive answer to the question. This is a preliminary step, and your outline may change once you have begun reading for your essay. We'll stay with the example we have given you, on Australia's political system, just to show you how it might be done in this case.

Why develop an outline?

This outlining step is designed to give you some idea of the things you will need to read about in order to answer the question and follows from the processes described in the first section - it means that you can then read with intent, and with an idea of how your argument might proceed, rather than just reading without direction on the broad topic.

When you are developing this preliminary outline, it is also a good idea to think again about WHY each of the major points you want to make is relevant to your answer. (This will help in avoiding that problem of putting things into your essay simply because you have found them in your reading - that is not always a safe thing to do - some of that material might not really be relevant to the construction of your answer). Once you begin to write, you will also have to make a judgement - and only you can do this - of the relative importance for you of each main part of the essay and therefore how much of the essay will be devoted to your major points. Remember, also that your essay will have to begin with an introduction and end with a conclusion.

So, what might be an outline for the question ‘Does Australia have a pluralist political system?’.

- introduction (describe what is meant by the terms 'political system' and 'pluralism', and any alternatives to pluralism)

- describe Australia’s political system (it is here that you will highlight information that will support your later argument about whether it is or is not pluralist)

- (body of argument which will bring first two parts of the essay together) - **your** answer to the question ‘is Australia’s political system pluralist’

    - if so, **justify** your argument and **respond** to possible counter arguments
    - if not, **justify** your argument and **respond** to counter arguments

- conclusion (draw together important points in your argument and any difficulties, nuances, etc., that need to be considered for a comprehensive answer to the question)

Although developing an outline may seem like an obvious step to take, many students do not do it. It is a good habit to get into, and will stand you in good stead if you continue to pursue your academic career - once you begin to write longer pieces, often in response to a topic you have devised in consultation with your lecturer or perhaps honours supervisor, you will still need to think about the structure of your essay, sub-thesis etc. When academics are writing books they will spend time thinking about what will be in each chapter and how the chapters might best be structured before they begin to write.

Be prepared to revise and flesh out your essay outline as you begin to read. In the course of reading, your argument might change. Revise the outline as new information and perspectives come to your attention, remembering always to think about the relevance of the material you find, and make sure that the revised outline addresses the essay topic and provides a structure in which you can develop your argument and your answer to the question.

III. REFERENCING

Referencing indicates where you have got ideas from and whose ideas you are using in support of or to help shape *your* argument. If you do not acknowledge your sources, then you are committing intellectual theft (imagine how annoyed you would be if someone took large chunks of your work, work on which you had spent considerable time, and passed it off as their own!). References also enable the reader to follow up the sources of your ideas.

You must indicate from where you have taken particular pieces of *information*. For example, if you say ‘Estimates suggest that the cost of the Gulf War to the ‘allies’ was approximately $US70 billion’, then you must give a referenced source for this. Similarly you must give references for *ideas and concepts*. For example, if you were writing on the nature of war and the war system, and you used Mueller’s argument about the decline in the utility of war among liberal democracies, you would have to acknowledge you were doing so.

There are a number of referencing systems. The one described here is the author-date (or Harvard) system - footnoting (also known as the Oxford system) is described later. In the author-date system, you provide (as a reference in brackets in the text) the name of the author, the year in which the publication from which you cite was published and the page (or pages) on which the quotation or idea is to be found. Thus a reference without a page number, or a date, is incomplete and therefore unacceptable.

The only time you may leave out a page number is if you are referencing the thematic approach of a work - for example, you may say something like, "Gurtov (1988) is the seminal text in the school often styled ‘global humanism’ in the discipline of International Relations" or "Other scholars, such as Axelrod (1984) have argued that cooperation in international relations can be understood by analogy to a ‘tit for tat’ game."
Here are some examples of the way you use this system.

i. If you use **words directly** from your source, then:

> "War should not be visualised as a sort of recurring outcome that is determined by other conditions" (Mueller 1990: 321).

or, you may choose to introduce the author into your sentence, like this:

> Mueller argues that "[w]ar should not be visualised as a sort of recurring outcome that is determined by other conditions" (1990: 321).

ii. If you are **citing ideas**, but not using the words directly (or if you have paraphrased what the person has said), you would cite in this fashion:

> Mueller draws an analogy with the abolition of duelling and slavery in his argument about the possibility of war becoming obsolete (1990: 322-23).

iii. In the examples above, the quotations and ideas are taken (obviously) from an article by Mueller. If there was **more than one author** you would cite in this way:

> It is fair to say that "the United Nations ... is no longer as hindered by the rivalry of the superpowers" (Diehl and Kumar 1991: 369).

If there are **three or more authors**, you can cite as (Smith et. al. ...) although it is usually not a good idea to do this if you introduce the authors into the structure of your sentence.

iv. If you have read a **chapter in an edited volume**, then you must cite the author of the chapter that you have read, not the editor of the book. For example, you would cite (Jones 1992: 126) not (Jones in Smith and Kettle 1992: 126), where Jones has a chapter in the book edited by Smith and Kettle.

v. If your source **refers to another author,** you acknowledge in your reference that you have found this information via a second source, thus:

> Waltz's organisation of the theories of war is, as Mueller notes, based on "whether the cause of war is found in the nature of man [sic], in the nature of the state, or in the nature of the international system" (1990: 321). [Note the use of [sic] indicates something in the quotation that is awry - in this case the use of 'man' when one assumes that Waltz and/or Mueller mean people]

vi. If you use a quotation from the **original source that has been reproduced** in the source you have read, then this is how you would do it.

> As Ken Booth argues, "in the emerging global polity, stable security can only be achieved by people and groups if they do not deprive others of it" (cited in Jones 1992: 114). [Note that you then list Jones in your bibliography, but not Booth because you have not read the Booth piece].

IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bibliographies are an integral part of the essay, not an optional extra. They provide the reader with an indication of the books and articles that you have read when preparing your essay, and they contribute to the acknowledgments of scholars whose work you have used. A bibliography can therefore contain more sources than are actually cited in your essay!

In the author-date system, bibliographies are set out alphabetically, by author surname. For books, the following structure is used: name of the author(s), year of publication, title of the book (which should be italicised or underlined), the city of publication (eg., New York or

Boulder, not USA), the name of the publishing company and, if relevant, the edition. For example:

> Hoffmann, Stanley. 1981. *Duties beyond borders: on the limits and possibilities of ethical international politics.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

If you are citing a **journal article**, you must give the name of the author(s), the year of publication, the title of the article (in quotation marks), the title of the journal (italicised or underlined), the volume number, the issue number (or the month/season of publication) and the page numbers of the article. For example:

> Cutler, A.Claire.1991. "The 'Grotian tradition' in international relations". *Review of International Studies* 17(1): 41-65

If you have cited from a **chapter or chapters in an edited book,** then your bibliography should list the particular chapter that you have read, under the surname of the author of that chapter. For example:

> Banks, Michael. 1985. "The inter-paradigm debate". In *International Relations: a handbook of current theory*. Eds., Margot Light and A J R Groom. London: Frances Pinter.

If you have cited from reprint editions, both the original date [in square brackets] and the reprint date should be given.

> Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. [1848] 1964. *The Communist Manifesto.* New York: Monthly Review Press.

V. PLAGIARISM

The Faculty of Arts defines plagiarism as "**the appropriation, by copying, summarising or paraphrasing of another's ideas or argument, without acknowledgement.**" Plagiarism is work that gives the impression that ideas and arguments are your own when you have actually derived them from someone else. It is a serious form of cheating which will always be treated severely and can result in failure in a course. The following examples should help clarify the way in which sources can be properly used.

Consider the following passage from a book by Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant:

> The starting point in making decisions about foreign policy is necessarily the concept of national interest. It is a truism that *all* foreign policy is, or should be, directed at the protection and advancement of the national interest. But the elements that make up the national interest, and our capacity to advance it, are not necessarily self-evident at all (Evans and Grant 1991: 33).

There are two ways that you could legitimately use this passage or ideas and arguments proposed in it.

The first is to quote the passage, in whole or in part, ensuring that you enclose the passage in quotation marks and give the source. Any alteration, such as the use of italics to emphasise, omission of some words, or including additional words, must be clearly shown. For example:

> The starting point in making decisions about foreign policy is *necessarily* [my emphasis] the concept of national interest.... [However] the elements that make up the national interest, and our capacity to advance it, are not necessarily self-evident at all (Evans and Grant 1991: 33).

The second is to refer to ideas or arguments found in the passage. For example, you might write:

> It has been argued that the starting point for decision making in foreign policy is the concept of national interest, but that defining the concept is no easy matter (Evans and Grant 1991: 33).

The following, however, are illegitimate uses of the passage:

A blatant form of plagiarism would be to use a slightly modified version of the passage without acknowledging its source. For example:

> The starting point in making decisions about foreign policy is the concept of national interest. It is a truism that *all* foreign policy is, or should be, directed at the advancement of the national interest. But the elements that make up the national interest, and our capacity to advance it, are not self-evident at all.

To paraphrase the whole passage and to omit its source is again a form of plagiarism. For example.

> The starting point of foreign policy making is the concept of national interest. While all foreign policy is aimed at the protection and advancement of the national interest, defining the concept is no easy matter.

Omitting quotation marks around the portions of the passage used, while acknowledging the source, is again a form of plagiarism. For example:

> It has been said that the starting point in making decisions about foreign policy is necessarily the concept of national interest; however, the elements that make up the national interest, and our capacity to advance it, are not necessarily self-evident at all (Evans and Grant 1991: 33).

Finally, the source may be acknowledged, but not the degree of indebtedness. For example:

> Evans and Grant argue that "[t]he starting point in making decisions about foreign policy is necessarily the concept of national interest. It is a truism that *all* foreign policy is, or should be, directed at the protection and advancement of the national interest" (1991: 33). However, the elements that make up the national interest, and our capacity to advance it, are not necessarily self-evident at all.

In general, always ensure that your acknowledgment shows the degree of indebtedness to your source. If a whole paragraph draws upon a particular source, then you may need to refer to your source several times rather than mention it once at the end of the paragraph. Again, remember to identify all your ideas, arguments and direct quotations from your sources - provided you don't continually quote lengthy passages, this can only add to the academic merit of your essay rather than detract from it. You should familiarise yourself with Faculty rules on plagiarism - ignorance of the rules is no defence.

PART B - USEFUL TOOLS

I. HOW TO READ

Below are questions you should probably have in mind when you read anything at all, but *certainly* anything you read in association with a course in Political Science.

The text itself
What is the author trying to say? That is, what is the logic of her/his argument? This is crucial to understanding the text as a whole, rather than just bits and pieces of it.

What are the main steps or subsidiary arguments in the overall case, ie., how is it organised and structured to generate its conclusions?

How are the arguments supported in terms of evidence, logic, examples, and emotional appeal?

What sort of style is used? That is, is it descriptive, analytical, emotive, polemical, etc?

Context
Why is the author making her/his case and why in this way?

What is/was the audience?

In what tradition(s) does the author stand? Who are the sources and authorities in terms of the kind of arguments, the way they are made, what supports them and who are the opponents inside or outside this tradition?

What knowledge, politics, orientation, experience does the author assume his/her audience has? And what does the author consider to be irrelevant that others may consider relevant to the argument? Why? That is, what can you tell about the text from what isn't there?

Reader's bias
What assumptions and biases are you bringing to the text? How do they influence your answers to the above questions?

Critical assessment
The above questions may help to provide a basis/framework for making critical assessments of the text's originality, strengths, weaknesses, implications, persuasiveness, applicability, acceptability, etc.

II. MAKING NOTES

Note taking should begin from the time you begin reading for your essay question. It helps tremendously if you have been able to develop an outline from the question. This will help you sort your notes into the relevant sections (thus overcoming the perennial problem of going through a mass of material to find an elusive quote!). More often than not, an outline emerges in the process of reading which means you have to develop a system of categorising ideas, quotes, theories that can be retrieved when writing the various sections of your essay.

Two points need to be kept in mind when note-taking. First, clearly identify your notes. Your notes must contain all bibliographical details, including page numbers, thus overcoming the temptation to plagiarise when your sources have been lost. Second, use a flexible system. This will enable you to rearrange your notes at various stages of your essay. For further material on note-taking, see chapter four of Clanchy and Ballard, *Essay Writing for Students*.

III. STYLE

Markers are always disappointed to read essays that display a considerable amount of research but are presented in a haphazard style. Your ideas deserve clear exposition and a polished presentation. Lack of clarity in exposition is often a symptom of confused thinking. Here are some suggestions from the Department of Government, University of Queensland, *Essay Guide* to improve your writing.

Grammar. Sloppy grammar and spelling distracts the reader's attention from your ideas. Political science essays are not the place for literary experiments.

Points. Do not submit an essay written in point (or note) form or with a series of one-sentence paragraphs. Write in complete sentences (with a verb).

Use Active Voice. Avoid passive voice - it leads to long, complicated sentences. Compare the following sentences. ‘The bill giving the right to vote to women was passed by parliament’; and ‘Parliament passed the bill giving women the right to vote’. The latter is clear and straightforward.

Avoid Qualifiers. Try to avoid the following expressions: ‘it seems’, ‘it appears’, ‘obviously’, ‘very’, ‘quite’, ‘mostly’, ‘often’, ‘frequently’. For example: ‘It seems that Bjelke-Petersen was a very strong Premier’ is tentative; why not ‘Bjelke-Petersen was a strong Premier’. Note the deletion of ‘it seems that’ and ‘very’.

Quotes. Each time you are tempted to include a direct quotation, ask yourself if it is necessary. You may paraphrase the idea in your own words, remembering to give proper credit to your source. If a direct quote extends over more than three lines, the quote should be placed as a block quotation - that is, indented on both sides and without quotation marks. Always give the correct citation and avoid overlong quotes.

Gender-Neutral Language. Avoid inappropriate gender-specific language, including gender-specific terms for groups of people, countries or natural phenomena. A common trap is the use of ‘he’, ‘him’, or ‘his’ as the default pronoun. See Part C of this guide for *The Australian National University Guidelines on Non-sexist Language* (1990).

Cliches and Jargon. Avoid words and phrases that suffer from overuse. Some examples are: ‘scenario’, ‘feedback’, ‘input’, ‘bottom line’ and ‘problematic’.

Contractions and Slang. Avoid contractions, slang and colloquial expressions.

Acronyms. Acronyms should be in parentheses at the first reference, following the spelled-out full form. In later references the letters are sufficient.

IV. WRITING AND REVISING

The essay should be a coherent and logical piece of analytical prose that is cogently argued, carefully documented, and well written. To achieve this requires thorough planning, writing and revising. You will have to accept the idea of writing at least three drafts. What follows is a description of the different stages in writing an essay.

1.Choose your topic as soon as possible:

what interests you most?
are sources easily available?
is the question clearly structured?

2. Research stage:

lecture notes and class readings/textbook;
reading list (leading to bibliographies and references;
library catalogues.

3. Initial planning:

try to clarify your viewpoint and probable conclusion;
block out the main steps/chunks of material leading to this conclusion.

4. First draft:

the purpose of this draft is to work out for yourself what you think about the topic, in relation to the materials you have read;
try writing quickly (to keep up with the creativity of your ideas) right to the end of the essay (to see it as a whole);
don't worry about style, spelling, etc - this is a private draft written for you to sort out your ideas.

5. Take a break of a few days, allow some time:

for the first draft to simmer
for you to stand back and be objective

6. Second draft:

the purpose of this draft is to **communicate** your ideas and argument (which you worked out in your first draft) **to your reader**;

edit your first draft: clear introduction?
coherent order of material?
effective use of paragraphs?
sufficient evidence/examples?
clear conclusion? etc...

7. Final draft:

edit for details of presentation: spelling; grammar;
referencing details, etc.

V. ESSAY CHECKLIST

Before submitting your essay make sure that you can tick off the following points.

- ☐ The question has been clearly understood and answered
- ☐ All parts of the essay contribute to an argument
- ☐ All terms and concepts clearly defined
- ☐ The logical structure of the essay is clear to the reader
- ☐ All references identify sources and accepted conventions observed
- ☐ Bibliography is included
- ☐ Sufficient margins have been left for markers comments
- ☐ A essay cover sheet has been attached to the front of the essay. These are available from School Office
- ☐ Keep a copy of your essay

PART C - FURTHER INFORMATION

I. OTHER FORMS OF REFERENCING: FOOTNOTING

Footnoting is a commonly used system of referencing that consists of sequentially numbered notes appearing either at the bottom of a page or at the end of an essay. Footnoting has slight variations from the standard Oxford style. The important thing is to be consistent with your punctation and the style of footnoting used.

1. Book with single author:

Footnote: Robert A.Dahl, *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961) 42.

Bibliography: Dahl, Robert A. *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in An American City* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961).

2. Books with two or more authors:

Footnote: Zbigniew Brzezinski and Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Power: USA/USSR* (New York: Viking Press, 1963) 79-82.
Bibliography: Brzezinski, Zbigniew and Huntington, Samuel P. *Political Power: USA/USSR* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

3. Article in edited book:

Footnote: Giovanni Satori, "European Political Parties: The Case of Polarized Pluralism", in *Political Parties and Political Development,* eds. Joseph La Palombara and Myron Weiner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) 145, 147.
Bibliography: Satori, Giovanni. "European Political Parties: The Case of Polarized Pluralism". In *Political Parties and Political Development.* Eds. La Palombara, Joseph and Myron Weiner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) 137-176.

4. Journal Article:

Footnote: Lucian W. Pye, "Communication and Chinese Political Culture", *Asian Survey* 18:3 (March 1978): 222.
Bibliography: Pye, Lucian W. "Communication and Chinese Political Culture". *Asian Survey* 18:3 (March 1978): 221-46. (This means the article appears in vol. 18, no 3, pp. 221-46).

5. In footnotes, you may see the words *op. cit.* and *ibid. Op. cit* means the 'work cited'. *Ibid.* refers to the work cited in the *preceding* footnote. Suppose you had referred to the Dahl book (see example one above) in footnote 4 and wished to cite it again in footnote 6. You could write:

6. Dahl, *op. cit.,* 47.

Suppose you wished to cite Dahl again in footnotes 7 and 8. Your three footnotes might look like:

6. Dahl, *op. cit.,* 47.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.,* 79

Footnote 7 refers to page 47 of the Dahl book. (If you refer to the same page in an *ibid.* citation, there is no need to write the page number.) Footnote 8 would refer to page 79 of Dahl. While most citation systems retain the use of *ibid.,* some prefer a short title instead of *op. cit.* Thus, if you had to make a second reference to the Dahl book (example 1) and the Pye article (example 4), your footnotes might look like:

4. Dahl, *Who Governs,* 98.
5. Pye, "Communications", 225-28.

Note that *ibid.* and *op. cit.* are italicised.

6. *Italicise or underline the title of books, periodicals and newspapers.* Titles of articles should not be underlined, but placed in inverted commas.

II. THE GRADING SYSTEM

High Distinction (HD) 80% and above

- Work of exceptional quality showing clear understanding of subject matter and appreciation of issues;
- has a clearly formulated argument which is developed throughout the essay;
- engages the question or topic throughout the essay;
- demonstrates wide reading of relevant literature;
- marked evidence of creative ability and originality;
- high level of intellectual work.

Distinction (D) 70-79%

- Work of unusual quality showing strong grasp of subject matter and appreciation of dominant issues though not necessarily of the finer points;
- offers an argument, though perhaps only in isolation: the essay may offer lots of information but little in the way of interpretation;
- masters most of the concepts and issues raised by the question;
- shows diligent and wide research;
- evidence of creative ability;
- solid intellectual work.

Credit (CR) 60-69%

- Work of solid quality showing competent understanding of subject matter and appreciation of main issues though possibly with some lapses and inadequacies;

- argument is clearly developed and supported by references though possibly with minor red herrings and loose ends;
- some evidence of creative ability;
- well prepared and presented.

Pass (P) 50-59%

- Shows awareness of the main issues in the question but has difficulty framing a relevant response;
- has difficulty in developing an argument;
- takes a simple factual approach and does not attempt to interpret the findings;
- written expression and scholarly conventions need improvement.

Fail (N) < 50%

- A lack of understanding or misconception of the issues and concepts raised in the question;
- no clear argument is presented;
- insufficient grasp of the relevance and interrelatedness of the material being presented;
- expression that is difficult to understand;
- carelessness about scholarly conventions, spelling and other aspects of presentation.

IV. ACADEMIC SKILLS AND LEARNING CENTRE

The Academic Skills and Learning Centre (ASLC) offers help to all ANU students with their academic work. It provides a free and confidential service. Students can choose to make individual appointments to discuss general problems with the management of their studies. Students can consult ASLC staff over essay drafts or essay questions. ASLC also provides small group sessions dealing with topics such as Introduction to University Study, Essay Writing and Preparation for Exams. The ASLC is located in the Lower Ground Floor, Chancelry Annex. Tel: (02) 61252972.

V. GUIDELINES ON NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE

What follows is a copy of the paper, *Guidelines for Non-sexist Language,* adopted by ANU Council on 9 June 1989 (1521/1989).

Guidelines on Non-sexist Language

These guidelines are to help University staff to avoid, in their spoken and written communication, uses of language which may appear to be discriminatory or which may gratuitously give offence. They rest on the belief that communication may become less effective if inaccuracy, irrelevance or an appearance of sexism intrudes, and that the English language is rich in alternatives which speakers or writers sensitive to the attitudes and belief of their audiences can use without reducing the effectiveness of their communication or sacrificing their notions of grammatical propriety.

1. Appellations and modes of address

University staff speak and write in contexts of varying formality and must make stylistic choices accordingly. At whatever level of formality the principles to be observed in choosing appellations and modes of address are that people should be treated equally, that no irrelevance should be introduced, that no person should appear to be excluded, and that there should be stylistic consistency.

If the context is one in which titles such as Professor and Dr are appropriate then Mr or Ms should also be used. The latter is usually preferable to Miss or Mrs, both of which introduce irrelevance in that they declare marital status. If the subject herself has a known preference for Miss or Mrs this should be respected. A mode of address which uses titles should not be mixed with one that does not: 'Professor Kerr, Ms Jones and Mr Robinson were present', not 'Professor Kerr, Debbie Jones and John Robinson...'. If the context is informal and the use of given names is preferred, all should be treated in the same way, using the form of given name or set of initials referred by the person concerned.

Designations of posts should not be exclusive. There are alternatives to **groundsman**, **security man** and **storeman** such as **gardener**, **security guard** and **stores officer** which appear neutral.

There are alternatives also to **chairman**, such as **chair**, **chairperson**, **convenor**. When the position is being referred to, one of these neutral alternatives is to be preferred. When the post is occupied, and the sex of the occupant patently obvious, courtesy may require that this be acknowledged when the person is addressed, as **Madam Chair** or **Mr Chair**, **Madam Dean** or **Mr Dean**.

2. The use of personal pronouns

Traditionally, and particularly in legal contexts, the pronoun **he** has been used generically. There is some recognition now that **he** is often understood to imply the masculine even when the generic is intended. Further, the appearance of exclusiveness can give offence. For both these reasons an alternative is to be preferred. The choice will depend in part on the context, but there are a number of solutions.

It is often possible to omit the pronoun without in any way altering the sense of the utterance: **a staff member's seniority can be judged from (his) salary and (his) length of**

service in fact gains in economy by the omission of the pronoun. **The head of department determines (his) staff loadings** is similarly improved.

Sentences can be recast in the plural: **secretaries should complete their stationary orders by the end of the month** or **all lecturers should display their timetable** on their doors. Alternatively the sentence can be made impersonal, a solution which may be the most appropriate in formal contexts: **the holder of an unreturned library book will not be permitted further borrowing**. If none of these solutions appeals in a particular context a little thought can usually contrive a rewording which avoids the apparent difficulty.

3. The generic use of man

The use of **man** as a word or syllable meaning people or more broadly, the humans species, can again appear to exclude women and so either cause misunderstanding or give offence. Rephrasing is possible. For example, **mankind** may become **human beings, people** or **society**, **the average man** or **the man in the street** may become **the average person** or **people in general**; **manning a project** can be changed to **staffing a project**, **engaging personnel** or **employing staff**; **manpower** may be replaced with workforce, personnel, staff; manpower may be replaced with **workforce, personnel, staff** or **employees**; **man hours** may become **hours** or **workdays** and **man-months staff-months** or **work-months**.

4. Gratuitous sex specifications

It is as unacceptable to draw attention to a person's sex, if it has no relevance in the context, as it is to draw attention to a person's race or physical disability. You may read, for example, **The graduate employment officer, a woman in her middle fifties, has proposed that seminars be held for the final year students,** or **It is recommended that Lenora Chou, an Aboriginal, be offered the post of assistant academic secretary**. The gratuitous nature of these specifications is made plain by reversing the specification of sex and race: **the graduate employment officer, a man in his middle fifties......It is recommended that Thomas Brooks, an Anglo-Saxon, be offered the post.....** There is, similarly, no reason to use nouns with suffixes specifying sex, such as **ambassadress** or **aviatrix**, or for using expressions which not only specify sex but also convey attitudes, such as **my girl** or **the girl in the office** for **secretary** or **the ladies in the pool** for **word-processing operators**.

The offence which such expressions may cause is of course likely to be compounded if the speaker alludes also to a person's physical attributes. Care needs to be exercised generally that, in the use of descriptive adjectives, no stereotyped view of either sex should obtrude.

5. Word order

Pairs of nouns and pronouns tend to become set in a conventional order: **he and she, men and women, husbands and wives, boys and girls.** In some contexts, if the order appears to give precedence to a sex, the order can be varied.

6. Direct quotation

In the handling of quoted material normal scholarly practice should of course apply. But, if the material quoted introduces a use of language or an expression of attitude through language which may be disruptive, it may be better to paraphrase the source.

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