1. Why do we write essays?

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2. Writing introductions

An introduction should…

- motivate the question. What is at stake here? Why is this such a significant question? Is it an area of controversy?
- introduce the material you will be using to answer the question (e.g. text[s]), if not defined by the question.
- define the terms of the question if necessary, and/or problematise these if relevant.
- give relevant context for the specific material you will be focusing on. If this is one or more texts, where/when were they written? Are they representative of a particular literary ‘movement’? Do they reflect particular concerns of their society/time?
- convey the direction of your argument and point towards your conclusion.
- give a clear sense of the structure of your essay, i.e. how you plan to approach the question.

How would you evaluate the following introductions? How could they be improved?

(a) ‘Not every reader of La ciudad y los perros will agree that the price paid for the various stylistic permutations one finds in it, for the episodic structure of the book and its covert system of information, is justified’ (Peter Standish). Discuss.

Vargas Llosa employed an unconventional and striking narrative technique in the writing of his novel La ciudad y los perros. Rather than the traditional linear and chronological plot he used a sequence of episodes which alternate between past and present. He also introduced a number of distinct narrators and narrative styles which are not always clearly labelled for the reader. Unravelling the threads of the novel’s structure thus becomes a major focus during the reading process. This essay will argue that the ‘price’ paid for these is not merely ‘justified’, but that the structure is essential to the novel’s significance.

(b) Discuss the nightmare quality of Conrad’s narrative.

The essence of Conrad’s writing is not to be found in a common subject, characterization, theme or narrative technique, but rather in a style or approach that governs and transcends all of these. Conrad
attempts to deal with human experiences of incredible depth and intensity, concentrating on the darker elements of emotional and psychological anguish, with a dual focus on the inner conflict created by external forces beyond a character’s control and the evil inherent in humanity. How does Conrad achieve this nightmarish effect?

(c) ‘In Cien años de soledad, humour is inseparable from a serious, even tragic view of human existence.’ Discuss.

Some of the major themes of Gabriel García Márquez’s most famous novel can fall foul to misinterpretation, or at least provoke different reactions across cultures. The novel is seen as ‘other’ to a British audience, a description of a fantasy world, which is incorporated into the European state of mind by terming it exoticism. Yet when the book was first published in Colombia, and Latin America as a whole, the response of its readership was one of recognition of everyday life and familial traditions, and a satirical representation of real historical events. This element of the book was naturally lost on the majority of non-Latin American readers, due to a lack of catch-all references to salsa or native savages covered in war paint – as Borges once said, there are no camels in the Quran. The one theme which crosses cultural boundaries with ease is that of humour, which is abundant from the outset, and both explicit and subtle. It is human nature across the planet to laugh, especially at the things we are most scared of, and to turn serious issues on their head in order to make them more bearable, but in Cien años de soledad, I would contest that not all of the humour has tragic or serious roots.

(d) Discuss the culterano features of Góngora’s works.

Arising from Renaissance poetic theory, ‘culteranismo’ and ‘conceptismo’ became, through the work of Góngora and his contemporaries, arguably the most significant stylistic developments in early seventeenth-century Spanish literature. In its broadest sense, the term ‘culteranismo’ refers to a deliberate attempt on the part of a poet to render his language and style more intricate and elaborate. Words and syntaxes of a Latinate origin were introduced; allusions and tropes of various kinds were woven densely into the verse. Poems in the ‘culto’ style were self-consciously crafted, their artifice being greatly admired by the learned reader for whom they were written. Although the target for much criticism, particularly concerning the narrowness of his ballads’ appeal in comparison with the traditional ‘romance’, the ‘culto’ style employed by Góngora was effective in enriching Spanish poetry in its diction, its syntax and its figurative language.

Examine one of your own introductions, taken from a recent essay. How could it be developed and/or improved?

3. Writing conclusions

This should bring your argument together, and should not introduce new analysis as such. However, it should be more than a simple summary of the points already made. The following questions may help you to clarify your ideas for the conclusion:

- What is the significance of your argument?
- What are its implications for our understanding of this text or its context? – or this historical event/period? – or this aspect of language use?, etc.
- Is the theme/idea you have explored related to any other key themes/ideas in the text/period/field of study? => do your findings have relevance for these too?
- Does your conclusion point to a reappraisal of any of the texts/periods/events/structures you have explored?
- Does it challenge received perceptions of this material/area of study?
Serious trouble with the writing of a conclusion often suggests one of the following:

- your argument is not well constructed
- you don’t actually have an argument!
- you need to spend more time thinking about the significance of your argument – you may find it hard to ‘step back’ from the detail
- you are struggling to put your material or your ideas into a wider context (more reading will usually help here)

4. Writing the main body of the essay

Paragraphs can…

- divide writing into easily manageable sections
- signal the introduction of a new idea or point
- signal a change of direction in an argument: ‘However, when we examine Shakespeare’s later works, it is evident that…’
- summarise what has been said so far before moving on to the next stage of an argument

What problems might be caused (or revealed) by paragraphs that are...

**too long?**

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**too short?**

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To make your essay flow smoothly and to construct a clear argument, it is essential to link your paragraphs together carefully. Here is an example from a book about Chinese business practices, showing the end of one paragraph and the beginning of another:

By using family titles to name their colleagues, Chinese employees shape their business relations in terms of the well-known conventions and roles of the family and social structure.

Interaction between employers and employees also finds a basis in family-centred codes of behaviour.

The author’s main point is that family relations are the basis for all Chinese social relations, including those in the workplace. The end of the first paragraph sums up the way that Chinese workers interact. The beginning of the second paragraph focuses on the way that Chinese employers and their workers interact.

The beginning of the second paragraph mirrors and repeats words from the end of the first one. The words ‘employees’ and ‘family’ appear in both paragraphs. The word ‘interaction’ mirrors the word ‘relations’. The phrases ‘shape their business relations in terms of’ and ‘finds a basis in’ say similar things. The author keeps his main point – all relations are modelled on family relations – before us, while working through different examples of it.
One way of thinking about it is that paragraphs should introduce a new point without losing sight of the old one; they should bring out the relationship between the last point and the new one. Link words and phrases work in both directions, backwards and forwards.

Here are some weak paragraph ‘links’ which do not fulfil this important role:

- ‘Another point is that…’
- ‘I will now discuss the issue of X…’

Here are some paragraph links: the last sentence of one paragraph leading on to the first sentence of the next. How are the links being made in each case?

1. […] Matto de Turner’s Aves sin Nido therefore touches only briefly on cultural structures of power, without elaborating precisely how local ‘custom’ can work to dispossess the indigenous population. Castellanos, on the other hand, is concerned precisely with such ‘cultural’ power structures. […]

2. […] The chapters written from the perspective of the educated Marito are interspersed with chapters ostensibly written by a radio soap opera writer in such a way that neither is given precedence in the novel. This juxtaposition of high and lowbrow culture throughout the novel forces the reader to compare and contrast the different styles and also to criticise the popular form. […]

3. […] As the novel progresses we can see that the biographical events begin to share something in common with the plot of a soap opera. The events that take place in Mario’s life edge constantly towards sensationalism like those of the radio serials: both involve family scandal, elopement and violence. Despite these areas of blurring, the distinctions between the two parts of the novel remain clearly delineated, given the rigidity of the novel’s structure. […]

4. […] In order to examine this topic fully, it is vital to consider not only the ways in which both Carpentier and Castellanos adopt styles which attempt to be realistic, but also the limitations and failures of these styles which arguably result in the true voice of the ‘Other’ remaining silent. The most immediately obvious solution to the problem of capturing the reality of the Other in these texts is to resort to realism, a style which would seem to afford the author the opportunity to present a wholly accurate portrayal of the ‘other’. […]

Linking words and phrases should be used throughout your essay, not just at the beginning of paragraphs, to show the direction of your argument. Linking words and phrases may:

- signal a reinforcement of ideas (e.g. in other words, for example)
- signal a development in ideas (e.g. moreover, more importantly)
- signal a change in ideas (e.g. instead, on the other hand, however, in contrast, nevertheless)
- signal a conclusion (e.g. thus, therefore, ultimately)

A warning – don’t try to use words like ‘thus’ or ‘therefore’ to suggest a connection between one idea and another where no logical connection actually exists!

Underline the words and phrases in the following essay which define the relationship between different points and/or help to guide the reader through the argument:
Discuss the representation of marginality in ANY TWO OR MORE urban texts.

Situated in periods of considerable transformation and upheaval, Roberto Arlt’s *El Juguete Rabioso* and Carlos Fuentes’s *Agua Quemada* present the theme of marginality as an extremely important but ambivalent one. This ambivalence stems from the intensely polemical socio-historical situation at the times during which these novels are written. *El Juguete Rabioso* is set against the chaotic background of Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century. Argentina in the 1920s ranked among the five or six most successful nations in the world and, according to all standard indicators, Argentina’s education level, access to health care and decent housing, and quality of life compared favourably with that of England, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Furthermore, the city's spectacular economic development attracted immigrants from all over the world, and it seemed that the path to prosperity had finally appeared. The fact, however, that an extensive amount of shantytowns were built on the city's margins and remained there through to the 1950s, debunks this myth of economic prosperity. Arlt follows the plight of a poverty-stricken and frustrated youth who is shunned from society and is consequently drawn to gangs and a life of petty crime. By contrast, Fuentes explores the theme of marginality in the context of a violently scarred political history that goes back to the bloody Mexican Revolution of 1910. Although the Revolution, after several years of bloodshed, instituted a political regime which brought nearly six decades of relative political and social stability, the turmoil of the Revolutionary period itself profoundly affected Mexican society. Fuentes powerfully demonstrates how the influence of the Revolution can be felt right up to the present day, through characters that live on the margins of reality because they are so caught up in the past.

The theme of marginality is represented through Silvio in *El Juguete Rabioso* and his ‘lucha por la vida’. Silvio learns throughout the novel that he is unable to succeed in society, primarily due to the fact that he is often judged on what he has, rather than what he can offer or whom he is. Society has reduced him to the status of object and has condemned him to a miserable life of unemployment and Arlt traces his attempts to transcend this marginality. He rebels against the economic limitations of his class firstly through robbery, secondly through employment, and finally through invention and literature. This is evident in the first chapter of the novel, whereby Silvio and his companions carry out a rather comical robbery in a library. Theft allows Silvio and his friends to attain freedom from alienation and to temporarily live *en société*:

> Así vivíamos días de sin par emoción, gozando del dinero de los ladrecitos, aquel dinero que tenía para nosotros un valor especial y hasta parecía hablarnos con expresivo lenguaje (p.105)

The mention of ‘expresivo lenguaje’ is significant in that theft almost expresses an existential desire to assert one’s being. The impossibility of living a comfortable life in modern society drives Silvio towards transgression as a form of transcendence. As he is unable to sustain an identity within a capitalist society, he asserts his existence through immoral acts and the rejection of traditional values. Hence marginality leads to a desire for immortality, which ironically leads to the path of self-destruction, which is perceptible through his suicide attempt.

Silvio also tries to integrate himself into society through various forms of employment, which paradoxically serve to expose the corrupt dealings and arbitrariness of the society that has excluded him. For instance, when he works for Don Gaetano, Silvio sees in his boss everything that he does not want to become; “Una sensación de asco empezó a encorajinar mi vida dentro de aquel antro…” (p.154) Furthermore, his hopes are dashed when he approaches a wealthy businessman who promises to employ him but who humiliates him by shouting at him and throwing him out. This induces contempt in him towards the upper classes:

> Tenía la sensación de que mi espíritu se estaba ensuciando, de que la lepra de esagente me agrietaba la piel del espíritu, para excavar ahí sus cavernas oscuras. (p.156)

This disillusionment inspires his final attempt at integration, enrolling at the Escuela Militar. However, he fails again: not because he is incapable of the work, but because he is far too knowledgeable: ‘aqui no necesitamos personas inteligentes, sino brutos para el trabajo’ (p.178). He learns that he is shunned both as a poverty-stricken individual and as an intelligent one. It is perhaps this consciousness that drives Silvio to betray Rengo in the final chapter, despite the fact that Rengo recognises his talents. Crucially, his decision to inform the architect of ‘el plan Rengo’ is necessary to destroy his old self:

> Hay momentos en nuestra vida en que tenemos necesidad…de destrozar para siempre la vida de un hombre…

Dr Joanna Page

Some material adapted from [http://www.rlf.org.uk](http://www.rlf.org.uk) and [http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/](http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/)
Silvio eventually confuses the distinction between lite dreams of fame and models himself on va Marginality is also presented as a form of escapism in the sense that Silvio exiles himself from a society that has left him profoundly disillusioned and invents his own system and life outside it. He does this through recourse to literature, dreams, and invention, hence artifice. Throughout the novel Silvio imitates certain modes of literature; for instance, he begins the novel by stating that from a young age he revelled in ‘las deleites de la literatura bandoleresca’. This love for literature is furthermore imitated in his life, which is perceptible in the Escuela Militar whereby he assumes the role of Rocambole with ‘[una] sonrisa canalla’ and an ‘actitud heroica’. Books for him represent a series of alternative lives from the everyday miserable life he endures, but also importantly offer a sense of hope for the future. Silvio also dreams of fame and models himself on various literary and revolutionary figures:

Yo podría ser un inventor como Edison, un general como Napoléon, un poeta como Baudelaire, un demonio como Rocambole (p.171)

Silvio eventually confuses the distinction between literature and reality and his marginalised life becomes almost a fiction in itself.

In Agua Quemada one is able to discern more brutal and violent forms of marginality. In ‘Estos Fueron los Palacios’, marginality at the hands of the Church is manifested powerfully. This is evident in the scene in which Manuela and the dogs are violently expelled from the cathedral, with priests grotesquely beating them with crucifixes to the approval of the faithful middle class. This may also be perceptible in ‘El Día de los Madres’, for the mere word ‘madres’ in title can signify ‘misfortune’ and ‘beatings’ in Mexican Spanish. The individuals marginalized in this story seem to be women; both Clotilde and Evangelina are deceased and remain spiritually absent from the house:

…no hay ningún recuerdo, ni siquiera una foto de mi madre. Ella murió cuando yo tenía cinco años, no la recuerdo. (p.57)

It is the absence and alienation of these two women that enables the men to live together and also allows them to express their masculinity. This is also perceptible in the narration of this story, as it is essentially from a male perspective. The darker side to this is that the reader learns that, Agustín, who is faced with inheriting his father’s ‘violencia impune’ and is unable to forgive Evangelina’s ‘irritante inocencia’, strangles his wife to triumph over his father and consequently uses his wealth to assure his impunity;

El parte médico dijo que tu mamá había muerto atragantada con un pedazo de carne…esas cosas se arreglan fáciles. (p.73)

Thus, women are marginalised in order to exercise a grotesque male rivalry and to gain power.

In ‘El Hijo de Andrés Aparicio’, Bernabé gains a sense of power by watching Carreón’s cruel treatment of his wife. Bernabé himself is alienated from society through, firstly, living in a squatter camp on the margins of Mexico City, and secondly, through the death of his father. This absence has a destructive effect on his life and leaves him impotent in terms of language; ‘las palabras le costaron mucho…sobre todo porque ya no recordó la voz de su padre’ (p.119). Bernabé is drawn in from alienation into a fascist group led by the very man that destroyed his family. However, this does not bridge the absence and lack of identity that he feels. He has a surname but no father to substantiate it. The marginality of Bernabé can be traced from a young age, as he leaves school at the age of twelve, and this continues as he grows up and earns a living cleaning windows on the city streets. Here he is poignantly exposed to a vast consumerist society, which leaves him startled:

…ganoso de todo lo que empezó a hablarle, otra vez las cabronas palabras, no hubo manera de escaparse de ellas diciéndole cómprame, temne, me necesitas. (p.129)

Just as society is indispensable to the survival of Silvio in El Juguete Rabioso, Bernabé is aware that he needs the very society that has caused his alienation. This is the fundamental ambivalence in the representation of marginality in these texts: on the one hand, the characters despise the root cause of their alienation, but paradoxically they need to integrate themselves into this society in order to maintain their existence.

Moreover, Bernabé’s family past has contributed to his marginality, and this can also be applied to other characters in Agua Quemada, who live on the margins of reality because they are so anchored in the past. For instance, in ‘El Día de los Madres’, violence in the past dictates the future and is repeated across generations, and thus marginalises the characters from any sense of rupture. The mere title of ‘Estos Fueron las Palacios’ clearly demonstrates an obsession with the past, and indeed, the story surrounds a crippled Luísito who remembers the past grandeur of the palace, which has been converted to accommodate twelve families. His desire to recapture the past through memory, books, photographs, and
letters occupies his existence. Hence, these characters have alienated themselves from a reality that is all too harsh.

Overall, marginality in these texts is represented through the plight of various characters. In *El Juguete Rabioso* Silvio lives on the margins of society paradoxically due to both his unemployment and consequently his intelligence. Similarly, in *Agua Quemada* women seem to be cast out of family memory or are ‘exterminated’ in order to allow a victory in the grotesque male rivalry of Vergara, Agustín and Plutarco. Ironically, the very absence of these men also results in the marginality of Bernabé. This frustrating marginality has a destructive effect on the characters; in Silvio it leads to recourse to literature, then to a tragic self-exile through his suicide attempt, and finally self-invention in the form of an anti-hero. By contrast, in *Agua Quemada* the effects are far more violent and destructive.

*Are there any criticisms you would make of this writer’s approach to linking her ideas?*

5. Engaging with primary texts or sources

- Quote directly from the text if the style used or the way something is expressed is significant to your point.
- Do not quote if you are simply giving plot details.
- Quote or give a textual example to back up each point you make.
- Do not quote unless the material is directly relevant to your point, and only quote those phrases which are of relevance. Be economical and precise in your use of quotations.
- If you need to include a quotation of more than two lines, offset it by increasing the margins on both left and right.
- Embed quotations within your own prose – this effectively means that they should form part of a longer sentence, often preceded by a comma or a colon.
- Explain who is speaking/give some kind of context for the quotation. Examples: 
  As Mario says of Julia, ‘...’
  Marito’s sense of comedy is evident, particularly as he describes ‘el air cariñoso que adoptan los adultos cuando se dirigen a los idiotas y a los niños’.
- Do not simply leave a quotation to speak for itself – make explicit the point you are drawing out.
- The following should be italicized or underlined: titles of plays, novels, or critical works which represent the whole book in question. The following should be placed in single inverted commas: titles of poems, articles or short stories. The rule is that anything which is part of a larger work (e.g. an article in a journal, or a poem in a collection) goes in inverted commas; everything else is italicized or underlined.
- Make sure you know the capitalization rules for the language you are working in. English titles take capitals for all major words, but other languages have different rules.