

Academic Writing

Part IB Michaelmas Term

1. Five Writers

Have a look at the cartoons overleaf. Which comes closest to the way you write?

Which of the qualities below (or their opposites) would you associate with each style? (Add your own ideas if you wish.)

[Lack of] focus	[Lack of] fluency	[No] clear structure	[Lack of] thoroughness
A unified 'whole'	Scope/breadth	Missing key ideas	[In]coherence
Flexibility [rigidity]	Irrelevant digression	Attention to detail	Distorted interpretations

Five writers	Potential strengths	Potential weaknesses
LEAPER		
CRAZY PAVER		
RUMINATOR		
BLUEPRINTER		
MAP-READER		

What can you learn from other approaches in order to avoid the potential weaknesses of your own?

2. Developing an argument

How can you ensure that your essay has a clear argument?

- Stand back from other critics' views and find your own path as much as possible, even if this is just a question of contrasting a variety of perspectives and coming down in favour of one reading over another.
- Always go back to the primary texts after reading secondary literature and look at the evidence, asking yourself whether you agree with the critical readings you have come across or not. Even if you agree with the approach taken by other critics, you may be able to find new textual examples or other ideas to support your chosen argument.
- Plan your essay carefully before you begin writing and have a sense of where you are going. Produce a short summary of your main points in sentence form, one per paragraph.
- Create a structure which shows clearly the direction of your argument.
- Make evident the ways in which each paragraph and each point contribute to your argument. Do not simply list points but have a sense of the forward direction of your argument. This needs to be particularly explicit in the introduction and conclusion.

Dr Joanna Page

- Subordinate *everything* (textual examples, etc.) to your overall argument: control your material, don't be controlled by it.
- Don't be afraid to acknowledge a counter-argument: framed within your essay structure, acknowledging an opposite stance can have the rhetorical effect of *strengthening* your own argument rather than weakening it. It shows that you have taken account of possible objections to your ideas. Explain the opposite view and what evidence it puts forward, then explain how yours diverges from it and why it should be taken seriously: is it a more accurate reading? does it point to some interesting tensions in the text? does it reflect to a greater degree what you understand to be the writer's main concerns and/or those of his/her context?
- Use core statements (see below).

3. Using core statements

A **core statement** summarizes the argument of your essay in one or two sentences. It points in broad terms to the whole of what you want to say.

Some of the advantages of producing a good core statement:

- it gives clarity and focus to your essay
- it defends you from confusion, or straying from the point
- it exposes any weaknesses, gaps or faults in your argument
- it allows you to adjust your argument early in the process of writing, before it is set in stone
- it can guide you towards any further reading needed
- it provides a strong logical structure before you plunge into distracting detail
- it can act as a useful basis for the introduction or conclusion

More notes on the core statement:

- It doesn't have to be a single sentence, although the discipline of producing just one sentence is very helpful.
- A good core statement is not merely descriptive (e.g. telling us vaguely what the essay is about, without any insight, reasoning or conclusions). A simple list of facts or ideas is not a core statement.
- A good core statement is precise, concise and complete, rather than long-winded, over-simplified or fuzzy.
- Compose a draft of your core statement when you start to plan your essay, then revisit and rewrite it several times as your ideas develop.
- Consider producing core statements for each of your paragraphs.

Creating a core statement:

Your core statement should **advance a thesis**, which means that it must make an arguable assertion. To test whether your assertion is arguable, ask yourself whether it would be possible to argue the opposite. If not, it's not a thesis, but more of a fact. For example:

- *Not Arguable*: 'Computers are becoming an efficient mechanism for managing and transmitting information in large businesses.' (Who is going to dispute this? It's not an arguable assertion – it's a fact.)

- *Arguable*: ‘Heavy use of computers may disrupt family cohesion and increase divorce in society.’ (This is arguable because many people may not believe it. It would make a good thesis.)

The core statement should be **specific** and avoid broad, vague generalizations. It should suggest the ‘why’ or ‘how’ behind your reasoning.

- *Poor Specificity*: ‘The Indians are portrayed better in *Balún Canán* than in *Huasipungo*.’ (This is more of a value statement than an argument and does not provide enough reasoning for the reader.)
- *Better Specificity*: ‘More detailed characterization and less reliance on racial stereotyping leads to a more accurate and sympathetic depiction of the condition of the Indians in *Balún Canán*.’

Good core statements often follow an ‘**although... actually**’ format. This is one of the most effective ways of finding something original and controversial to say. In effect, you are telling someone that what he or she thought to be previously true really isn’t. The very structure of your essay is therefore set up to deliver an insight beyond the obvious. Some examples:

- *Although* it appears that *Huasipungo* was written with the intention of creating sympathy in the reader for the socio-economic plight of the Indians, *actually* the text reinforces a number of racial stereotypes.
- *Although* many critics have argued that *Lazarillo de Tormes* follows a loose, episodic form, *actually* the narrative obeys a clear chronology and textual coherence is achieved through the repetition of themes and motifs.

(n.b. You may not wish to reproduce the ‘actually’ in your essay, which isn’t always necessary. It is often implied by the clause beginning ‘although’.)

Evaluate the following core statements according to the criteria set out above:

- a. Marginality is a central theme of urban texts; a concept that not only affects people, but places, memory and history as well.
- b. Although the Cairo Air Improvement Project is contributing many efforts in Cairo to decrease the pollution rate in Cairo, there are some points in the projects that may not be feasible to apply in Egypt, like using lead free gasoline, using alternative resources, and raising the awareness of citizens.
- c. The peculiar subjectivism and self-referentiality of Lorca’s mature poetry may initially lead the reader to consider his work as ‘apolitical’ and ‘non-ideological’. Yet *Poeta en Nueva York* in particular reveals Lorca’s capacity for highly motivated and politically committed poetry, a characteristic which is most clearly seen in his denunciation of the plight of New York’s black community.

Review a recent essay you have written, and condense its argument into a core statement of one or two sentences.

4. The introduction

What needs to be covered in the introduction? What are its various functions?

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How would you evaluate the following introductions?

‘These films are caught between the need to expose the horror of the past and the desire for personal and collective catharsis.’ Discuss with reference to AT LEAST TWO post-dictatorship Argentine films.

The films *Boda secreta* (1988) by Alejandro Agresti, *Un muro de silencio* (1993) by Lita Stantic and *Los rubios* (2003) by Albertina Carri, all made after the return to democracy in Argentina, explore the social and psychological effects of the military dictatorship which lasted between 1976 and 1983. In this essay I will examine *how* these films deal with the issue of representing such a difficult topic.

To what extent does Galdós prove himself to be a realist writer?

The works of Galdós are commonly interpreted within the context of nineteenth-century Realism, his novels being compared to those of other leading European Realists of the period, such as Balzac and Dickens. However, the precise characteristics of the Realist movement are not easily defined as its practitioners are often charged with not being very realistic at all. Possible definitions abound; they do seem to concur on a number of points which should characterise Realist fiction. Firstly, it is presumed that the plot and characters must be based on reality: both the events and the people in the novel should be plausible, in the sense that they could conceivably exist in the world which provides their inspiration. Secondly, the plausible plot and its protagonists should be firmly placed within a broader context of contemporary social and/or political realities; and lastly, that the novelist should aim for narratorial objectivity in his representation of real life. These three general characteristics largely preclude both Romantic and idealist approaches to literary creation, although vestiges of these appear in Galdós’s novels as in those of his contemporaries. Naturally, any attempt to make literature realistic is thwarted by irony: the aim is to create a reality (that is itself being a contradiction in terms) which is ultimately only an illusion of reality. However realistic a novel may be, its representation of life cannot be as comprehensive or as objective as life itself. Galdós demonstrates an almost modernist consciousness of the problems of transforming life into art. How successful was he in portraying the reality of life in general, and specifically life in nineteenth-century Spain? What aspects of his literary technique contribute to the effect of Realism in his novels?

To what extent can *La campaña* and *El general en su laberinto* be read as historiographic metafiction?

Confessing to a fascination with clocks and watches, Varela in *La campaña* remarks that the past is not only to be remembered but to be imagined, in the same ways as the future is imagined, 'para que ambos tengan sentido'. Both *La campaña* and *El general en su laberinto* represent imaginative re-workings of the past, re-opening the closure of official history to emphasise the marginal and the untold stories. As such, both novels reflect concerns which are typical of the new Latin American historical novel – and indeed, of historiographic metafiction in general, as theorised by Linda Hutcheon among others. Central to these concerns is the issue of narrativity and the problematisation of representation: in contrast to the traditionally conceived historical novel, the new and postmodern historical novel foregrounds the increasingly blurred distinction between the two discourses of history and literature, the relationship – often arbitrary – between past events and those which are privileged to be made into History. This particularly postmodern self-consciousness is to be seen operating at a number of levels in both novels; however, many of the stylistic features which characterise historiographic metafiction are here conspicuous by their absence. Attempts to place either novel squarely with the framework of historiographic metafiction, with its typical use of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and forms of intertextuality, are not entirely convincing; this is more emphatically the case with *El general en su laberinto*.

5. The conclusion

What kind of difficulties do you experience when writing conclusions? Why do you think you experience those particular difficulties?

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