Study, examination and assessment skills

Go up at least two grades by use of good English

Brief comments by Gilbert Pleuger to enable students to gain higher study rewards

HOWEVER GOOD YOU ARE AS A STUDENT OF HISTORY you are assessed by your written work and a refined, clear, robust English style can raise your assessment grades by up to 50 per cent. English and expression, therefore, matter a great deal. You should not write or speak your answers in the colloquial language you speak to your friends, because that is not what is expected by those who assess your answers. English expression changes with each generation and is not as it was 40 years ago but if you aim for high standards you will have an advantage. This page presents a few points of good practice to help you express yourself clearly.

A strong style can be achieved by these 14 points

The three most frequent errors that weaken style are colloquialism, cliché and passive verbs.

- Colloquialism is the kind of English you use when talking to your friends. For example, instead of 'Italy, with her beat-up old army, was smashed in North Africa', write 'Italy, her army poorly equipped and without fighting spirit, was soundly defeated in North Africa'.
- Clichés are overused words or phrases. Their use lessens the sharpness and strength of your English. You can identify clichés by the frequency with which they are used. Examples include: The Wall Street Crash and depression put the cat among the pigeons for Labour plans in 1931. Germany's defeat at Stalingrad was the moment of truth for Hitler's resistance on the Eastern front.
- Passive verbs. The use of passive verbs is the major reason for absence of robust English. Consider this sentence: Grey, returning to office, having seen the support of the people, set about passing the Great Reform Act. Passive verbs are identified by the 'ing' at the end. The sentence expressed with active verbs reads: Grey, who saw the support of the people, returned to office and passed the Great Reform Act.
- Dead words and expressions make your English flabby. Dead words include very; totally; quite; extremely; completely; absolutely; really. These words can slip into your essays because we use them when we speak. Some of them, such as completely or totally, weaken what you write by exaggeration. Dead expressions include: It is worthy of note that … It is not an exaggeration to say that … It is interesting to note that …
- Tautology is the useless repetition of the same idea in different words. For example: Wilhelm II, troubled and anxious by the Balkan crisis in 1914 …; The sudden shock of the two nuclear bombs made the Japanese leaders agree to peace.
- Avoidance of general adjectives and adverbs. Words such as good, bad, badly, brilliant, dreadful or terrible can be replaced, usually by more specific words. Example, 'Winston Churchill's party, after doing dreadfully in the 1945 election, became the Opposition.' It would be more effectively expressed as 'Winston Churchill's party lost over half their 387 seats in 1945 and became the Opposition.'
- Particular words to use with care or to avoid. These include: just; simply; also; and, especially, get or got. The last two should be replaced by a more specific verb: 'The German army got bogged down at the Marne' should be replaced by 'The German army's advance was halted at the Marne'.
- Confusion in the use of effect and affect. Affect means influence. For example, wealthy landowners were affected by the People's Budget in 1909. Effect, which can be used as a verb or a noun, means the reason for some event. For example, Prussia's use of railways effected a rapid victory in 1870. Used as a noun you would write: The effect of the railways was a rapid Prussian victory.
- Tone. When you write for your Tutors or Examiners use a tone which is neither deferential nor subservient, as though you cannot know much about the subject; nor patronising, as though the reader does not know as much as you.
- Contractions. Do not use contractions (such as, don't, weren't) in essays. Contractions are inappropriate in formal English.
- The personal pronoun, I or my. The personal pronoun should not be used in exam answers. If you wish to give particular emphasis that the idea or argument is yours, use the expression 'This writer's view is …'
- Apostrophe. The apostrophe indicates the possession of a thing or a quality by someone or something. For example: The machine gun's advantage is the rate of fire. Cavour's squint eyes suggested a master manipulator's mind.
- Use of its/it's. It's means it is, but its denotes possession. Note: in this instance the apostrophe rule does not apply. Mistakes with the use of it's/its is widespread in students' work.
- The dash (-). Avoid the use of the dash. It tends to be used instead of the more helpful full stop, colon or semi-colon.

The importance of words

Whereas some academic disciplines require particular aptitudes, the foundation requirements for History are an ability to read and write. From this basis the History skills are developed and one of these is language skills. An advanced History course begins the preparation of students to be among the thinkers in any branch of life and a thinker has to be able to deal with complicated ideas, enabled by higher-order language skills. Only with a rich vocabulary is it possible to think with the precision needed for complicated ideas and then to communicate them. In a top-grade answer every word matters, and the use of exactly the right word enhances the quality of your work.

Progress with expression is achieved by awareness of the importance of words and the creation of a rich vocabulary. You may be good at this anyway and widen your vocabulary without difficulty, but if you are not you will benefit from more formal methods. One way is to have a little notebook and jot down words, whose meanings you do not know, as you read. Then, every week or so, look up the meanings of the new entries in a dictionary and write them in. Words new to you are best remembered by use; the vocabulary notebook method enables you to skim over entries, now and again, and refresh your memory. In this way you will have more words at your fingertips and you will have taken steps toward being a powerful thinker and communicator.