

AJ's Essay Tips (version 17.10.2018)

BASIC DOs AND DON'Ts

Do:

Address and understand the question.

Organise your arguments into paragraphs.

Illustrate your points with appropriate citations, quotations, and examples.

Don't:

Waste words by repeating the title in your opening sentences.

Change subject within a paragraph.

Insert irrelevant matter to get closer to the word count.

List items in a bibliography when they are not included in the footnotes and/or when you haven't read them.

READING

Websites without a reputable institutional affiliation have no extrinsic authority and must be treated with suspicion. If you are unsure about a website, ask me before citing it.

The reckless Taruskin is to be read with caution, and quoted still more so.

Books and articles more than forty years old are to be avoided unless they have been specifically recommended.

GRAMMAR AND STYLE

'It's' means 'it is'; the possessive determiner is 'its'. (You wouldn't write 'hi's' or 'her's', would you? So don't write 'it's'.)

'Quote' is a verb, not a noun; the related noun is 'quotation'.

'Due' is an adjective, not a participial. It is therefore correct to say 'x is (or was, or will be) due to y', but to use the conjunction 'due to' as a casual substitute for 'owing to' is poor style indeed. One correct 'owing to' is worth much more than the two extra keystrokes it requires.

Avoid unattached participial clauses, e.g. 'Born c. 1300, the greater part of Machaut's career was spent as a canon of Rheims Cathedral'. It was Machaut himself, not his career, who was born c. 1300. The correct way to write this sentence is: 'Born c. 1300, Machaut spent the greater part of his career as a canon of Rheims Cathedral'.

Though summaries of dramatic and literary plots are customarily written in the present tense, summaries of scholarly literature should not be: debates have a past, present and potential future, and this should be clear from the summary.

The best place for the word 'however' is almost always somewhere in the middle of a sentence, enclosed by commas, and not at the very beginning.

Hyphenate a century when adjectival ('a fifteenth-century mass') but not when nounal ('a mass composed in the fifteenth century').

Names ending in -s take the possessive -'s just like names ending in any other letters, e.g. Strauss's, not Strauss'. Exceptions are made only with Classical names (Pericles', Tiberius') and in poetry (where -s' is a poetic licence).

VOCABULARY

Instead of...	use...
Due to [at the start of a sentence]	Owing to
due to the fact that	because
previous	preceding, prior, earlier, anterior, former
highlight	emphasise, stress, underscore, accentuate, spotlight
feature (verb)	incorporate, be characterised by, exemplify
in-depth	detailed, painstaking
main	principal, central, chief, foremost
great	prodigious, extensive, impressive, momentous, seminal, influential
many	[say how many]
is comprised of	comprises, is composed of
the aforementioned	[this is an essay, not a tenancy agreement]
As a possible alternative to...	always consider...
this	that
these	those

CONTENT

Tell the story about the people, places and musical objects indicated by the essay title, not about the individuals who have recently written about those people, places and musical objects. In other words, don't look *at* the lens of modern scholarship: look at your subject *through* the lens of modern scholarship.

Don't waste words by duplicating book titles in the text when they appear also in the footnotes.

As a rule, direct quotation should account for not more than around ten per cent of an essay. You should therefore aim to quote less and paraphrase more.

Be cautious in accepting or rejecting hypotheses. This invariably boils down to choice of words: the credibility of your conclusions can depend on a word like 'perhaps', 'maybe', 'apparently', 'conceivably' or 'almost'.

FORMAT

Unless a quotation forms a whole sentence, punctuation following a quotation must be placed outside the quotation.

Footnote numbers should be placed *after* commas, semicolons or full stops, not before them.

Visiting students: your domestic usage may differ from the above! For quotations, please feel free to keep to your accustomed format.