

COMP 516

Research Methods in Computer Science

Dominik Wojtczak

**Department of Computer Science
University of Liverpool**

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Lecture 15: Essay writing

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The format of your essay

- sections should be of roughly equal size
sections that are reasonably balanced are easier to read
- figures & tables should have a caption
and must be referred to in the text
- footnotes are problematic because the reader is distracted by jumping to the bottom of the page and back to the main text
- remarks in parentheses tend to distract and should be used sparingly; they can often be omitted, or the parentheses removed

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The introduction: the most important section

- for longer technical documents, most readers never go beyond it
- if the introduction is good, they may feel encouraged to read on
- the introduction is also the hardest part to write, and has to be rewritten several times
- good rule structuring arguments: answer sequences of **what - why - how** questions
- always state what you are talking about first before justifying it or diving into details

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The introduction: common mistakes

- **Exaggerated claims**, which may sounds naive

Adopt a neutral tone, and remain careful and factual

- **Assuming too much knowledge from your reader**

You have immersed yourself in the topic, but your reader has not

Be aware of that, and explain and introduce your topic in a comprehensible way

- **Unclear medley** of exposition, subject history, and related work

Deal with these aspects separately, postpone exposition

State early what you do in the essay

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The references and citations

- **mandatory** that you cite your sources; otherwise, you plagiarise
- do not present something obtained from someone else as new
- also avoid making that impression inadvertently
- if you use someone else's wording verbatim, say so explicitly
“The following definition is taken verbatim from [X].”
- any cited work must be referred to in the main text
- on the other hand, you only have to cite those works that are relevant for your work, not everything that you have read

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- the bibliography is one of the first things a reader looks at
- it places your work in context
- an expert reader will recognise familiar references quickly, and also notice omissions
- a non-expert reader may appreciate the bibliography as a way to learn more about the topic
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The writing process

- main writing effort goes into **organisation** and **re-writing**
- it is impossible to write a perfect essay in one go
- you have to start somehow, and will produce a version that you do not like
- however, you need that mediocre version as a basis for writing a better one
- you should **enjoy writing and re-writing** rather than being annoyed about it
- what you throw away counts as much as what you keep, because it improves the quality of your text

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- writing can be viewed as organising material, down to the organisation of the words in a sentence
- you have to bring a tangle of ideas into a linear sequence
- each sequence of thoughts should follow a logical connection, with not too many jumps
- try to make a point, e.g., explaining a concept, only once in the main text
- this forces you to think about the best place to make that point
- important things you will have to say twice
 - the first time in the introduction where you have to be brief
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What do I want to say?

- in most cases, when you get stuck when writing, you do not know exactly what you want to say
- make that idea clear in your mind **first**, then write it
- often, you can be unhappy with a piece of text because one thought led to another, but you wound up somewhere unintended
- if you know what you want to say, then you know early if you are going in the right direction

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- dedicate one paragraph to one topic at a time
- get directly to the point
- do not worry too much about gluing the new paragraph to the previous one
- a clear structure holds the text together, not phrases
- the resulting paragraphs will become “modular” and can typically be moved around easily
- get into “writing mode” where you are agile and write and re-write quickly

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- you won't like some things, and may be happy with other parts
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“I don’t like it”

- have you adopted the wrong tone?
- are there conflicting goals in a certain piece of text (e.g., two different types of audience)?
- are you getting lost in details on a side point?
- do you need a new piece of terminology here and should you introduce it much earlier?
- most of all, does what you say make sense?
- frequent “cut and paste” by computer can produce incoherent writing; it is often better to re-write

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Revise

- you may have to scrap some parts of your draft and start over
- remember that the final product counts, which tends to be good only if you throw things away
- other parts of your text may be at the right place and may be roughly right
- revise them as well
- shorten sentences by micro-organising them so that, e.g., a concept is introduced at the end of a sentence where the next sentence can pick it up

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- cut fluff such as “it can therefore be observed that”
- shorten long and pompous phrases; compare
 - “initial impressions can have an extraordinarily powerful impact”
 - “first impressions matter”
- polish sentences so that they can be read without stumbling
- avoid false leads
- often, a word or phrase can suggest another meaning that is not intended, forcing the reader to re-read

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- polish sentences so that they can be read without stumbling
- avoid false leads
- often, a word or phrase can suggest another meaning that is not intended, forcing the reader to re-read

The final version

- your final version should scan well
- the reader should feel informed after a first look
- the first sentences of each section, and in the same way the first words of a paragraph, should give an idea of what is coming
- be explicit about the logic of your argument, so that the reader can follow it even without checking the precise details
- imagine someone reading your work at midnight on the underground train
- in contrast, your text should not read as if it was written at midnight on the underground
- if it reads effortlessly, your readers will notice its quality and appreciate the effort you have put into it

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Tips:

- Leave plenty of time for proofreading.

Catching glaring errors can often dramatically improve your grade.

- Try reading your essay out loud.

Hearing the flow of the sentences can often help to catch mistakes.

Get feedback from a friend.

Books aren't written - they're rewritten. Including your own. It is one of the hardest things to accept, especially after the seventh rewrite hasn't quite done it.

– Michael Crichton

Announcements

- **No lectures** next Monday (29th Oct) and Tuesday (30th Oct)
- you should spend that time **working on your presentations**
- we resume on Thursday (1st Nov at 10am)
- **some feedback** on your topic should be now visible in VITAL (**no news is good news**)
- **2nd Nov (Friday) at 6pm**: the deadline for submitting your presentation and **preliminary bibliography** for your essay
- **10th Dec (Monday) at 6pm**: the deadline for submitting your **essay**

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