

Writing a coursework essay – notes for undergraduate economics students

Things to remember:

1. Answer the question.

If the essay title is “What caused the ERM crisis of 1992/3?” a description of the Sterling Crisis of 1949, although it may be interesting and even instructive about fixed exchange rate regimes, does not answer the particular question asked.

2. Write in sentences and paragraphs, with correct spellings and grammar.

Sloppy mistakes in spellings and grammar suggest to the reader a general sloppiness of thought. On the other hand, disciplined self-expression in grammatical terms can improve the exactness and clarity with which our ideas are expressed. Hieroglyphics (e.g. $g \uparrow \Rightarrow r \uparrow$) may be a useful way of summarising a chain of argument, but you still need to make the argument verbally. If you use equations (or if you feel you must use hieroglyphics), always explain your symbols.

3. Meet and stick to the word limit.

Do not imagine you will get higher marks by over-shooting the word limit with extensive irrelevant material. Within the word limit, write as much as necessary to make the point clearly.

4. Assume that the reader is intelligent, but ignorant of the material taught in your course.

However, avoid lengthy derivations of results that are not central to your argument, and do not repeat yourself unnecessarily. For example, if you have explained the operation of the multiplier once you probably do not need to explain it again for a change in the opposite direction. Simply refer back to your earlier discussion. It is in cases like this where you make use of a mechanism or chain of argument that you have already explained, that hieroglyphics can provide a useful summary to highlight the specific case to which you are now referring.

5. Structure the essay.

Begin the essay with an introductory paragraph saying how *you* interpret the question. The ability to interpret a question in terms of models that you know is an important skill. Note that for many essay questions there are a number of ways in which the issues can be approached. The reader is interested in knowing at the beginning of the essay how you have chosen to tackle the question and how what you are going to say *answers* the question.

6. Write the main body of the essay in such a way that it is clear why each paragraph follows from the preceding paragraph.

7. Be selective in your use of data and diagrams.

Tables of data and diagrams can be very useful in illustrating and clarifying your answer. However, only present data that is relevant to your argument, and include only properly labelled diagrams relevant to your argument. If a table of data or a diagram has no bearing on your argument, omit it. Similarly, if you do not refer to a table of data or a diagram (e.g. “see Fig. 2”), omit it. Make it clear to which time-period and country your data refer. Always give the source for the data - i.e. where *you* found it.

8. Avoid personal opinions and doubts in the main body of the essay.

Do not confuse personal opinions with the results of your model. Especially avoid phrases such as “I don’t know how to derive the next bit.” In an essay the reader is interested in your knowledge, not your ignorance (this may differ from how you would answer a problem-set). In a coursework essay, if you aren’t sure how to get from one step of your argument to the next, either re-arrange the essay so that a derivation of that step isn’t required, or seek help from your class teacher or your class-mates.

9. Use references correctly.

In the text, only refer to works you have consulted yourself and use the system (Smith, 2000). The list of references is a list all works you have referred to in the text.

10. Appeals to authority and the status of findings.

If you say 'Jones found that ... ', explain clearly whether what Jones found was a piece of raw data, an econometric inference or a purely theoretical result. If you don't know, omit the reference; Jones won't mind.

11. Write a conclusion.

A good conclusion would be a short paragraph at the end of your essay repeating the main elements of your argument in a compressed form, along with an expression of your opinions in cases where economists disagree. For example, if the question asks “Is unemployment always ‘a bad thing’?” it is clearly plausible that different people might hold different opinions. You are being asked the question, so your conclusion should tell us what your opinion is and why it follows from the arguments in your essay.

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