Aboriginal Studies Guide to Writing Assignments

5 June 2013

READING THE QUESTION AND PLANNING THE ANSWER

Read the question carefully: break it down into its component parts if necessary. What does the question ask you to do? Compare? Discuss? Contrast? Consider? Seek to do what the question asks you to do. Most importantly, acknowledge and clarify to yourself what the question is asking.

Having understood the question, make sure you answer it. Address yourself directly to the problem at hand. You must avoid falling into the trap of simply writing down all you know about a general topic instead of answering the specific question that has been set.

ARGUING AND SUPPLYING EVIDENCE

When you have read a question, understood it and decided that it is the one you will answer, you will already have a point of view about the general area. This is the nucleus of your argument. But remember, a point of view must be strongly argued to stand firm. Broad assertions are no substitute for strong argument. For each contention, offer evidence to support it and give the source of the evidence, that is, an in-text citation (see Aboriginal Studies Style Guide). Be aware of where your argument is heading as you progress through the paper. Ask yourself questions when writing your essay, for example, ‘why am I introducing this point?’ ‘do I have evidence to support this assertion?’

Once you have planned your essay (and your argument) carefully, you should only have to ‘flesh it out’. But this is not as simple as it sounds. Good writing is an art and requires care and practice. There is no ready formula to achieve a good writing style. Nonetheless there are certain guidelines which can help you to achieve greater clarity of expression and thus enhance your argument:

- Take care not to make errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation. Reading your essay aloud to yourself helps to detect many errors, and I urge you to adopt this practice.
- Always write at least two drafts of every essay. This will help you to ‘polish’ your expression and your arguments.
- Always try to write clearly so that others can understand what you have to say. As a rule of thumb, if you have to read anything twice to be sure of its meaning, then you probably need to re-write it.
- Try to avoid long, involved sentences.
- Avoid excessive use of quotations, and avoid long quotations altogether in short answers.
• Unless you are quoting someone else, use your own words.

• Write as economically as possible. It is not necessarily a virtue just to be able to write a certain number of words. Often lengthy words, lengthy sentences and over-length essays betray a lack of clear thinking and result in vagueness and verbosity.

• Do not use ‘it’s’ in essays. In the possessive sense it is grammatically wrong, and you cannot use abbreviations (that is, ‘it’s’ for ‘it is’ in essays). Nor can you use ‘can’t’, ‘won’t’ and so on. Abbreviations such as etc, eg, ie, cannot be used either.

Checklist for Essay writing

We recommend writing at least two drafts of every essay. Working with a rough draft is essentially a checking and re-writing process. At this stage in the preparation of your assignment, you should have a clear idea of the purposes, content, structure and basic writing style. The following can be used as a checklist to ensure all the details of your essay are complete.

1. Check your Introduction
   Does it:
   • first approach the topic in a general way
   • limit the scope of the topic, ie, define the topic.
   • Explain the plan of coverage.

2. Check the body of your essay
   Does it:
   • expand the plan of the essay given in the introduction
   • keep to the topic
   • back up claims with precise detail or evidence?

3. Check that you have expressed everything apart from quotations in your own words, and that you have given the sources of all your paraphrases, summaries and quotations.

4. Check any quotations
   Are they:
   • relevant
   • copied exactly
   • cited correctly (using an in-text system). See attached Style Guide.

5. Check your conclusion
   Does it:
   • summarise the main ideas of your essay
– evaluate the material you have presented
– state your conclusions

6. Read through your essay, checking grammar, sentence structure, punctuation and spelling. It often helps to read it aloud.

Now you should be ready to write the final draft, taking great care with actual presentation. Then re-read it for a final check.