What constitutes good presentation and structure in an essay?

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[Introduction]

If you Google ‘writing skills’ and ‘employability’ you will be presented with various links indicating that the ability to communicate clearly in writing is a skill that a whole range of employers look for in applicants. Writing essays at university is an opportunity to develop and practice that skill. But apart from issues of employability, writing an essay is an exercise in ordering your thoughts and communicating what you want to say, and being able to do that is both satisfying and generally useful. There are various aspects to writing a good essay. What follows is concerned with how to present and structure essays. The essay falls into two main parts: the first focuses on presentation, the second on argument and structure. These two parts correspond to two of the three categories highlighted in the assessment criteria used in the School of Humanities at Bristol. The remaining category (‘Knowledge and Understanding’) is not explicitly discussed here, in part because it is harder to generalise about and in part because it is implicit in what I say towards the end of the section on structure. In addition to explaining what might constitute good presentation and structure, this essay aims to illustrate good practice in its own presentation and structure.

[Part I: Presentation]

Before turning to the specifics of presentation, it is worth reminding ourselves of the general point: presentation matters. It creates a good impression and puts the marker on your side: why irritate the marker before he or she has even begun to read your essay? Failings in presentation will result in the loss of marks.

You should make sure you use generous margins so that when your essay is marked, the marker can write comments and corrections in the margins: three centimetres left and right, and two and a half top and bottom is about right. You should set the line spacing to one and a half and use a 12-point font—certainly no smaller than 11 point—for the main text of your essay. Tight line spacing and small fonts may save
paper but they are harder to read and won’t endear you to the marker. But of course, endnotes and footnotes can and should be in a smaller font size.\(^1\) Avoid fancy, ornate, or idiosyncratic fonts like, say, \texttt{Bauhaus} or \texttt{Desdemona} or \texttt{Mistral}: they are difficult to read and will not endear you to your marker.\(^2\)

Paragraph breaks are best made by leaving a blank line between paragraphs as done in this essay; there is no need to indent the first line of a new paragraph.

If you use technical terms in a foreign language such as Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit, Pali or Chinese you should put these in italics. For example, one of the words for ‘meditation’ in Pali is \textit{jhāna} (Sanskrit \textit{dhyāna}). An ancient Greek word that is sometimes translated ‘soul’ is \textit{psychē}. The original Greek word that modern English translations of the New Testament give as ‘love’ is \textit{agapē}; this was translated into Latin as \textit{caritas}, which gives us the English word ‘charity’ and the King James translation of the New Testament in fact uses this word rather than ‘love’. Christian writers sometimes contrast this kind of love with sexual or erotic love, or \textit{erōs}. Yet in speaking of love, Plato used the word \textit{erōs}, which is somewhat confusing from the point of view of modern usage since we normally wish to contrast ‘platonic’ love with sexual or erotic love.

Number pages. This allows markers to find their way around essays and to give specific feedback of the type ‘you make an excellent point on p. 3, but fail to develop it on p. 6’.

I come next to the topic of referencing sources. It is essential that when you quote directly from a source this is acknowledged with a precise reference to the source in a note. (A precise reference is one that includes page numbers.) Indirect paraphrases or summaries of an author’s argument also require a precise reference to your source. If you fail to provide one you leave yourself open to the charge of plagiarism: stealing other people’s ideas and research, or in simple language ‘cheating’.

\(^1\) This is an example of the footnote font size: 10 point. Footnotes can be single spaced.

\(^2\) Here I cannot resist noting my fondness for Baskerville and New Baskerville, first created in the eighteenth century by John Baskerville in Birmingham, though in this essay I use the more common Times New Roman. But any of the standard serif or sans serif fonts will do.
There is no universally accepted convention—or ‘style’—for citing sources in notes and bibliographies. In Religion and Theology we recommend that you either follow the conventions of the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) or use a form of the author-date system. These styles are set out in ‘A Guide to Referencing your Work’ on the University of Bristol website at:

http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/referencing/index.htm

You can download a PDF of the complete MHRA Style Guide for free from the MHRA website. It is also available in book form from bookshops and online retailers.

Let me give some account of how the MHRA style works. Basically you reference your sources in notes, which may be placed either at the bottom of each page (footnotes) or all together at the end of an essay or dissertation (endnotes). Notes should be indicated with superscripted arabic numerals, numbered sequentially and placed after punctuation marks, ideally after the full stop at the end of a sentence (as in the examples of footnotes 1, 2 and 3 above). By way of further example here is a footnote reference mark after a comma, and another after a semi-colon; that should suffice to illustrate this principle. The style used in the reference varies depending on what type of source you are citing. The most common types are a single-authored book, a chapter by one author in a book edited by another, and a journal article.

In the MHRA style (but not the author-date style) the first time you cite a particular book, chapter, or journal article in the notes, you should give the bibliographical details in full. Books should be cited in notes by way of the author, title (in italics), place of publication, publisher and date of publication. Individually authored chapters which are taken from an edited book should be cited by way of the author of the

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4 This note is here because I wished to give a further illustration of placing footnote reference marks after punctuation marks.
5 See previous note. (Of course, this is not a very good way to make use of footnotes!)
6 E. P. Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 4.
chapter, title of the chapter (in inverted commas), the editor and title of the book (in italics or underlined), the place of publication, publisher and date of publication, year of publication and page numbers. Articles which are taken from a journal should be cited by way of the author and title of the article (in inverted commas), the journal title (in italics), volume number, year of publication and page numbers. If you are citing a book, etc., that you yourself have not actually seen and checked in the original, you should cite your actual source. Failure to do this could leave you open to the charge of plagiarism. You may also find yourself citing as sources works such as the Bible, or works by ancient authors (Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Shankara, Nagarjuna, Augustine of Hippo), usually in translation. There are often particular subject specific conventions for referencing these that you may need to ask your tutors’ advice about.

A full bibliography of works used in writing the essay should appear at the very end of your essay in alphabetical order of authors’ surnames. Full bibliographical details of all books, chapters and articles should be given in the same way as in the notes,

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10 Sanders, pp. 36–37.
except that authors’ surnames should be given first, followed by their initials (or full name).

This should have given you a basic idea of how to reference your sources, but please note that I have provided you with only a few examples. There is not the space here to set this out in full: you will need to look at the fuller instructions on pages of the University website referred to above in order to reference your work properly. Remember that while the final bibliography is not included in the word-count, footnotes are. One advantage of the author-date system is that it generally involves fewer words, so is helpful when the word-count is tight.

Finally in this first part on presentation, I should say something about how to give quotations. Cousins concludes his article by stating that ‘we should no doubt speak of a date for the Buddha’s Mahaparinibbāna of c. 400 B.C.’. That’s one way of giving a quotation: if it’s a short quotation (less than forty words) put it straight into the body of your essay in single quotation marks. Longer quotations (over forty words) should generally be given in a separate indented paragraph in a slightly smaller font size. Here’s a longer quotation (seventy-seven words) from the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, an ancient Buddhist text from the Pali Canon:

> I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Supreme One, the Mighty, the All-seeing, the Ruler, the Lord of all, the Maker, the Creator, the Chief of all, appointing to each his place, the Ancient of days, the Father of all that are and are to be. These other beings are of my creation. And why is that so? A while ago I thought, ‘Would that they might come!’ And on my mental aspiration, behold the beings came.

*[Part II: Structure]*

Like presentation, good structure is essential if you want to get high marks; a well structured essays allows the reader to follow what it is you are trying to say. The

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13 Cousins, ‘Historical Buddha’, p. 63.
basic structure of an essay revolves around three things: (1) introduction, (2) main body, (3) conclusion.

An introduction should indicate to the reader how you understand the question, what you regard as the key issue (or issues) and how you are going to approach addressing those. An introduction may thus function rather like a contents page of a book, indicating how you have broken down the question and intend to structure your answer. For this reason, while you may well draft your introduction before you write the rest of your essay, it is often a good idea to return to your introduction and consider your overall structure when you have finished the basic draft of your essay.

The main body of your essay tackles the specifics of the question. In order to structure the main body you must pay particular attention to the question. Often there are basic clues on how to structure an essay in the question. Many questions in effect invite you to consider two (or more) sides of an argument: ‘To what extent …?’ or ‘How far do …?’ or ‘“This alone is the truth of the matter.” Discuss.’ Even if you feel fairly sure of the line you want to take, put yourself in the position of someone trying to argue the opposite or some other position and try to think of the sorts of objections that he or she might come up with. Other questions ask you to ‘explain’ or ‘consider’ or ‘analyse’, often adding a word like ‘critically’. In such cases you need to think through what issues and problems are raised by the subject matter; you need to think through how best to order and explain those. That’s your chance to show your independence and originality, topics that I will return to in a moment.

There are various things you can do to try to improve your awareness of structure. Order your thoughts and try to group ideas. Try to avoid ending up with a random list of points joined together implicitly or explicitly by some such statement as ‘and another thing …’. Think about the sequence in which you present ideas and try to group all points relating to one topic together; try to avoid introducing some topic, meandering into some other topic and then coming back to the first. If you use such words as ‘therefore’, make sure that what you say next really does follow from what you have just said.
Think about your audience: who are you writing for? It is often better to think of your reader not as your lecturer or tutor, but as someone who may not know very much about the question. If you have your tutor in mind as the reader, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of thinking, ‘If it’s not quite clear, Dr so-and-so will understand what I’m trying to say and fill in the gaps.’ If, however, you think of yourself as having to explain a topic in your own words to another student on the course who is perhaps answering a different question and so hasn’t done the same reading as you, it forces you to think more carefully about how to introduce and explain the topic.

It can sometimes be helpful to remind your reader where you are in your overall structure by using such phrases as ‘First … Secondly …’, ‘Turning now to …’, ‘Finally …’. Sometimes it helps to use headings and subheadings to signal changes of topic. Even if you don’t use these explicitly, they should be there implicitly. (In this essay I have put such headings in square brackets.) One simple test you can do after you have written your essay is to try to reduce it to a number of main headings with bullet points that reveal a basic structure. If you can’t, something has gone wrong.

Under the heading ‘Argument’, the School’s marking criteria highlight three things: coherent analysis of the question, independent and original thinking, wide reading. All these three aspects in effect mean that there is no one right answer to a question. Essays test not whether you know the right answer, but whether you understand and can present the problems and issues a question raises. Independence and originality are for the most part not about coming up with some new idea, some new solution to a question, that no one has ever thought of before. Rather they are about how you negotiate a question, the decisions you make about what needs highlighting, and your ability to express what you understand the issues to be in your own words. Remember, it is when you understand something that you can express it in your own words. And understanding comes from appreciating the various aspects and sides of a question. And that comes in turn from wide reading and deep thinking, not just reading the one book or article that has the ‘right’ answer.

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15 See Appendix: Essay Reduced to Main Headings & Bullet Points.
Finally in our discussion of structure we come to the conclusion. If an introduction sets out the contents of the essay that is to follow, the conclusion should summarise the main points. If your conclusion introduces some new idea or point that you have previously not mentioned, again something has gone wrong. Rather the conclusion should briefly sum up the main points of your essay and what you think what you have presented adds up to.

[Conclusion]

I hope to have set out basic guidelines for presenting your essays, and provided you with some tips for structuring your essays, having in mind the School’s marking criteria. But these are precisely tips, points that you should bear in mind. There is no one simple formula for writing a good essay. Above all, an essay should be an exercise in communication. You should aim to communicate as clearly as possible to your reader what you have read about a topic and what you have understood. Consistent attention to the various details and conventions of presentation along with careful thinking about how you order and structure your essay should make for better communication.

2994 words (including notes, excluding bibliography and appendix).
Bibliography (using MHRA style)


Sanders, E. P., *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995)

ESSAYS: PRESENTATION AND STRUCTURE

INTRODUCTION
1. General importance of essay writing skills
2. Present focus: presentation and structure (not knowledge and understanding)
3. Illustration of good practice

PART I: PRESENTATION
1. Importance
2. Margins
3. Font (size in main text and notes)
4. Paragraph breaks (blank line)
5. Technical terms in foreign languages (italics)
6. Number pages
7. Referencing sources
   • style (MHRA)
   • position of note reference numbers (after punctuation marks)
   • in notes
   • in final bibliographies
8. Indicating quotations
   • short with quotation marks
   • longer (40+ words) in separate paragraph

PART II: STRUCTURE
1. Introduction – ‘approach’
2. Main body
   • the question
   • argument: different sides
   • order and group ideas/points
   • audience
   • signal progress through the structure
3. No one right answer: independence and originality
4. Conclusion – ‘summary’

CONCLUSION
1. An essay: an exercise in communicating what you know
2. Attention to presentation and structure will help in this