School of Law
LLB Law
First Year Study Skills Handbook
2016-17
1 Guidance on Hours of Study

Embarking on a full time degree programme is a full time undertaking and students are recommended to devote at least 30-35 hours per week (including lectures and seminars) to their studies during term time. The time outside formal teaching sessions should be used for independent reading and research in preparation for essays and seminar presentations, and to consolidate and supplement information given in lectures and seminars. Independent study is extremely important not only in developing the skills needed to achieve a good degree but also in developing the transferable skills required by employers.

It is important that you develop good study habits in your first year. These include having a scheduled day each week in the library or designated study area to do your set reading and seminar preparation, reading up-to-date issues of relevant journals to keep abreast of developments in the discipline, and developing strategies for efficient note-taking.

1.1 How to Study

The following notes are intended to help you study at university successfully. They do not cover everything that you might want to know about techniques of study: we want to keep them short enough for you to read quickly. But we hope that they make the process of learning and studying more efficient and more productive.

2 Lectures and Seminars

Lectures provide an introduction to a sub-field, topic, or issue. To get the most out of lectures it is important that you learn how to be an active listener. In particular, you should develop strategies for taking notes. You will not be able to take down every sentence the lecturer says, so you need to work out how to extract the relevant information and the gist of an argument. Some students develop their own short-hand, others type up their notes after a lecture to make sure they have fully absorbed the ideas. One particularly effective technique is to spend twenty minutes after the lecture re-reading the notes, putting them in order, and then formulating a couple of questions for the seminar.
Seminars are scheduled after a lecture and give students the chance to ask questions, offer up their own views, and give presentations (see ‘Oral Presentations in Seminars’, below). It is crucial that you prepare for seminars. Read through your lecture notes and do the set reading, come prepared with questions and ready to contribute to discussions.

3 Oral Presentations in Seminars

3.1 Why do tutors use oral presentations?

Oral presentations are the cause of a great deal of anxiety, so why do lecturers continue to require you to do them? There are quite a few good reasons...

- You learn more. Researching and presenting a subject usually results in better understanding and recall.
- Presentations given by members of your peer group can stimulate interesting discussions which are not tutor led. They provide a chance for you to develop your own thoughts and ideas.
- It gives you the opportunity to practice giving presentations before you get into the ‘world of work’. Many people have to make presentations at work. You can give yourself a head start in the relatively safe environment of the classroom.
- It gives the class someone other than the tutor to listen and respond to.
- If you are giving your presentation as a team, this gives you the chance to meet and work with other people, and enjoy the team effort of putting your ideas together.
- There is usually some flexibility in the topic you present. It is your chance to do something that interests you; if you’re interested in the topic, your presentation will benefit!
- Unlike an exam, you can prepare more or less exactly and take all the materials in with you.

3.2 What makes a good oral presentation?

- It has to be audible. If the class cannot hear you, they are not going to pay attention. Looking up and making eye contact with people at the back of the room will help you project your voice. Try to reduce the amount of
unnecessary noise around you; for example, if the classroom is by a busy road, it may be worth making sure all the windows are closed, at least for your presentation.

- **Talk to your audience** rather than reading your notes out. It will be far more interesting and far easier for them to follow.
- It has to be the appropriate length. Make sure you know how much time you actually have, and practice your talk beforehand against a clock. There is nothing worse than having to squash enough material for one hour into ten minutes. You do not necessarily have to talk non-stop; you can leave time for questions or discussion (people will ask questions if you make it interesting!).
- The content of your presentation needs to be relevant to the course and to your audience. Address your fellow students, not the tutor, and make sure the content is appropriate to their level of knowledge. If you want them to sit up and listen, make it directly relevant to their lives.
- Your presentation should have a clear structure. Your audience will quickly get lost if you jump around and do not make the structure explicit. Distributing a hand-out first with the outline of your talk will help your audience pick out your main points. It is helpful if you give ‘signposts’ to the structure of your talk; for example you could start by saying ‘first, I am going to talk through some definitions of —
- and then discuss the role of --- within ---’ and later: ‘so, I’ve spoken about ---, now I’ll go on to ’
- Aim for a presentation style that holds the attention of your audience. Use understandable, clear language, OHPs, slides, hand-outs, questions and discussion. Look at the audience, make eye contact, smile, try not to fidget; ask the audience questions, or ask them to discuss a point.
- Use clear hand-outs. Provide hand-outs containing a summary of the presentation, follow-up reading, and any other crucial information. Make sure that your hand-outs are written/printed large enough, and that not too much information is squashed onto one side.
- If you are presenting in a group, make sure everyone is clear about their tasks and what they do when; you do not want three people all doing the same thing. Think about who will stand and sit where (and practice arranging the necessary furniture in the room beforehand). Groups give you the opportunity to divide the topic into sections, with each person presenting a section. Be careful however, that there is continuity and each part is relevant. Someone should give an introduction and a conclusion to hold the whole talk together.
3.3 Checklist

Try answering the following questions to help you clarify what you are going to do. Add any questions that will help you:

- How long have I got?
- What do I need to include in order to cover the topic?
- Where can I find out information?
- Have I cut out everything which is not relevant?
- Is the structure clear?
- What hand-outs do I need?
- When and how will I use them?
- What activities can the group take part in?
- Can I present from my notes without reading word for word?

3.3.1 Before the presentation

- Have I got the hand-outs in the right order?
- Have I got my notes to refer to?

3.3.2 During the presentation

- Take a deep breath
- Relax and smile!
- Do not hide behind the projector
- Do not read out the notes
- Talk to the back of the group, so your voice carries
- Look at your audience
- Do not rush through
- Give the opportunity to ask questions/clarify issues
- Be flexible; if your audience do not understand be prepared to rethink
- If someone throws in a question you are not entirely sure about, open it to group discussion.

This is the topic you have researched; relax and enjoy telling the rest of the group. If you are enthusiastic, it will come across.
3.3.3 After the presentation

For assessed work, you will be given formal written feedback by your tutor, but it is important to ask yourself, and ask a fellow student who saw the presentation, the following questions:

- What were the strengths of my presentation?
- Did the hand-outs work well?
- Did the group participate in/enjoy the activities?
- Could I be heard? Did I hide? Did I make eye contact?
- What were the weaknesses of my presentation?
- What could be improved for next time?

Remember – relax, smile and have fun!

3.4 Guidelines on Oral Presentation and Group Work

Summative group work and summative oral presentations are to be treated as any other piece of summative work and as such in the absence of extenuating circumstances will be subject to the undergraduate regulations relating to a repeat of the course or resit of the assessment in accordance with the conditions for progression.

All students are required to attempt and complete summative oral presentations or group work unless a student has adequately documented extenuating circumstances.

Where a student has genuine learning needs that have been recorded with the university’s disability and dyslexia service and which prevents that student from attempting or completing the summative oral presentation or group work, these should be notified in writing to the course convenor prior to the assessment. The course convenor will then offer the student an alternative means of completing the assessment, which still meet the learning outcomes for the course.

4 Essay Writing

An essay is a way of presenting the reader with an account of the ways in which you have found your learning engaging and meaningful – it’s a ‘know and show’ opportunity for you. It is a chance to both create a map of a particular territory of knowledge, as well as an invitation for the reader to take a guided walk through that territory. It should have a clear structure and style, content that is relevant, and a rhythm and momentum to the arguments presented that the reader experiences as credible. So it should say, “Look, here is my well informed, balanced, complex view of this particular world that I’m asking you to look at, and I hope you find my ways of seeing persuasive”. In all, try not to let the assignment become just a flat
and dull summary of other people’s ideas and thoughts. Try to present it in a way that shows the following features:

- that you have knowledge of a particular area of study including concepts, debates and issues, and research evidence that affect the issue;
- your systematic comprehension of what is known, by putting the knowledge in your own words in an intelligible way;
- that you can critically analyse the material under consideration, dissecting arguments in a systematic and balanced way;
- once you’ve taken apart other perspectives, you can synthesise those perspectives by putting them together again in a fresh way, looking at the connections and gaps between differing views;
- finally that you can evaluate the material in terms of its internal coherence, its links with other perspectives and views, and in relation to your own experiences and views. This will help you to give an account of how you have weighed things up, and why you’ve done so in the ways that you have.

The stages of essay production could look like this. But remember, this is not a prescriptive list. You will find your own start to finish path for a written assignment and may already be familiar with these and other aspects of effective writing. Our invitation to you is to take charge of the structures, mechanisms and methods that work best for you, so long as they help you to reach your highest potential.
To summarise, a basic essay structure will often look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understand – ensure that you know what the question is asking you to do.</th>
<th>E.g. ‘analyse’, ‘evaluate’, ‘critique’, ‘synthesise’ etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify – pinpoint the issues or the focus of the question.</td>
<td>Demonstrate that you have understood all the possible issues and undertaken further research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure – ensure that there is a clear structure to your answer.</td>
<td>Include an introduction, main answer and conclusion which draw out the key points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge – demonstrate a good grasp of the legal principles and the relevant law and show evidence of wider reading and research.</td>
<td>Always cite the relevant law to support the facts or your arguments and identify relevant key issues, concepts and debates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguments – set out clear defensible arguments in your answer.</td>
<td>Do not simply recite the law. Compare and weigh up strengths and weaknesses and/or identify areas for reform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support – back up your arguments with authorities.</td>
<td>Always use cases and journal articles and relevant examples throughout your answer and include a bibliography at the end of your answer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation – ensure that your work is in the correct format and is clear, coherent and legible.</td>
<td>Use good grammar, language, expression and referencing and always follow the word count.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.1 Analysing an essay title

When you choose an essay title, you should first analyse it. A good way to start is to pick out the key words. These fall into two categories: content-related words and procedure-related words.

- Content-related words - the words which signal to you what you should write about
- Procedure-related words - the words which indicate
how you should write about it

For example in the title: ‘Pressure groups have never successfully affected government policy’. Evaluate this statement with reference to at least three pressure group campaigns from the last five years. The key content words are: pressure groups; government policy; successfully; three campaigns and last five years. The key procedure word is: evaluate

The content words set the parameters on what you can write about. The procedure words control your approach. Sometimes questions do not include any procedure words, in which case you will probably need to ensure that you cover the relevant background information/facts, and include analysis and evaluation of them.

### 4.2 Some key procedure words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account for</th>
<th>give a good explanation of something and evaluate (possible) causes/reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analyse</td>
<td>examine the topic by dividing it into parts and looking at each part in detail; form judgements about each element and the whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argue</td>
<td>provide reasons for and / or against something, in an appropriate order, citing evidence, which may be other people’s research, or other kinds of facts / information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess</td>
<td>judge the significance of something, referring to the special knowledge of experts wherever possible (i.e. referring to / quoting from other people’s work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on</td>
<td>give your own opinion about something, supported by reasons and evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare</td>
<td>examine one thing in relation to something else, to emphasise points of difference or similarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>explore the differences between two things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticise</td>
<td>give your judgements about the good and / or bad qualities of theories / opinions supporting your decisions with reasons &amp; evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define</td>
<td>explain the exact meaning of a word or phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>give a full account or detailed representation of something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>consider something by writing about it from different points of view with supporting evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enumerate</td>
<td>list and mention items separately in number order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>calculate the value / effectiveness of a theory / decision / object etc., including your own opinion, and supporting each point with evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>give reasons for or account for something, so it is clear / easy to understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate</td>
<td>use examples or diagrams to explain something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpret</td>
<td>give your own opinion of the significance of something (give reasons / evidence wherever possible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justify</td>
<td>give good reasons for decisions or conclusions, perhaps by referring to other texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline</td>
<td>give the main features, facts, or general idea of something, omitting minor details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prove</td>
<td>show something is accurate/true/valid by using facts, documents and / or other information to build your case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconcile</td>
<td>show how apparently conflicting things can appear similar or compatible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relate</td>
<td>establish how things are connected or associated, how they affect each other or how they are alike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review+/85</td>
<td>to examine an area and assess it critically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show</td>
<td>explain something giving evidence or examples to establish a strong case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>put something clearly and concisely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarise</td>
<td>give a brief, concise account of the main points of something (leaving out details)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trace</td>
<td>follow the cause or stages in development of something from its start</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### 4.2.1 Planning your essay

Many people go wrong when planning essays because they assume they need to read a lot before they start to plan. The problem with this is they rapidly acquire a lot of information which is very difficult to organise, and the more they read, the worse it gets! A way of approaching your essay that avoids this problem is to follow the sequence below.

1. Analyse the title: what does it require?
2. Find out the essential information; check any words in the title
you do not understand in a general reference book like an encyclopedia or a reference text for your discipline.

3. Start to plan the structure of your essay. You should see what the question needs you to put in your essay. Then when you do start to read in earnest, your reading will be much more focused.

Some ways of starting to structure your essay could include:

- talk the title through with a friend (but be careful to ensure that the final work is your own and that you do not collude preparing and writing the essay)
- talk it through to yourself
- start to write (but remember that at this stage, you will need to be prepared to scrap most of what you’re writing)
- draw a ‘mind map’. Write the main areas of your essay in the centre of a large sheet of paper. ‘Brainstorm’ ideas connected with them, drawing in lines to show how they connect, and annotating the connecting lines. Add more ideas in bubbles as they occur to you, till you have a map of your essay, with all the ideas linked.
- draw a ‘flow diagram’, which is a series of boxes connected to one another, with a stage of your argument in each box.

You could try all these things; you can try them in any order. You can also repeat them at a later stage if you feel your essay is going off the rails a bit.

As you plan, start thinking about:

- what areas are very complex
  - what areas need developing more
  - what areas need an example or illustration
  - what areas need references

4. The next stage is to read, because you should be much clearer about what you need to find out from the texts. This will save you a considerable amount of time and make your reading much more effective. Because you are searching for something specific, you are more likely to recognise it when you find it. Do not spend too long reading. Make sure you allow time for writing the essay. People probably learn as much from the process of writing as they do from reading, as it’s the time you really make sense of the new ideas.
5. You are ready to write a draft essay now. First though you may need to re-plan it in the light of your reading. Changing your plan is fine, as it proves you have learnt from the reading! When you are drafting, it is more important to write something than to get it perfect. If there are any real tangles, leave them for the time being; they may be clearer later.

6. Revise your draft and be quite ruthless in editing if necessary.

7. When you are happy with the content of your essay (or when you have run out of time!) make sure you proof-read your essay. This is very simple, does not take very long, but is polite to the marker, shows you care about your work, and it can positively influence the mark you get!

Proof-reading should focus on the following:

- Spelling: Sit down with a dictionary and a ruler and work through your essay line by line backwards, starting at the end, using the ruler to focus on each word. If you are word processing, use a spell-check. Even so, you will need to check your essay for ‘typos’, such as ‘fro’ instead of ‘for’ and ‘form’ instead of ‘from’, which your computer will not spot.
- Punctuation: Read the essay aloud, slowly, as if you were giving a speech. In particular check for mistakes with apostrophes and run on sentences.
- Favourite errors: Most of us have words that we always spell wrongly and perhaps other ‘favourite’ errors as well. Compile a list of your personal ones to use when you proof-read.

8. Hand your essay in ... on time!

4.2.2 Writing Conclusions

Many students find conclusions difficult. Again, there are several models you can choose from:

1. ‘This essay has demonstrated ...’

This is probably the simplest way to finish your essay (and the one most people opt for in exams). You simply summarise the content of your essay, drawing attention to your main points. The disadvantage with this is that for a relatively short essay, your reader will probably still remember what you told them; it adds little to your essay, it’s just a way of stopping! However, if your essay is longer than perhaps 4,000
words, it is always worth including a short summary. The reader can refer to it if they have missed any of your main points. For example: This essay has discussed X, Y, and Z.

2. ‘In response to the question...’

If you have so far described the arguments for and against a particular point of view, you can use the conclusion to give your own perspective and explain why you hold it. You need to be careful, because the conclusion is not a good place to introduce new information. It’s better to evaluate information you have already given earlier in the essay. If you find yourself tempted to introduce new ideas, you can go back and build them in to your essay. For example: There are strong arguments supporting X and Y. However, the arguments for Z perhaps carry more weight. This is suggested in particular by factors A, B and C.

3. ‘Where this essay could go next’

When someone completes a research paper, they usually end by suggesting what the next person to do research in that area needs to look at. This again is a sophisticated ending, to be used if you are fairly confident about the topic you are writing about, but to be avoided otherwise, because it can also expose what you don’t know!

To use this approach in your essay, you could identify ‘gaps in current knowledge’, for example: Although there is considerable knowledge about A, and its effect on B, there is as yet little information about the effect of A on C, particularly from the perspective of D. Until more is known about this area, conclusions must remain tentative.

Again, you might choose one of these endings for a shorter essay, and a combination of several, or all of them for a longer piece of work, like a dissertation.

4.2.3 Tips on the content

- As we have discussed already, an argument (i.e. a point of view), a claim, or an attitude you want to support/prove/explain should be at the centre of your essay. Try to keep the focus on your argument throughout your essay. Do not get sidetracked or wander off the main point.
- Be aware of other points of view. You only have to think about the different beliefs people held 100 years ago, or that people from different cultures hold, to realise that different points of view can be held on absolutely
everything. You need to acknowledge this diversity and comment on why you hold the view you do. Use appropriate examples and illustrations to support your points. These really help to give weight to your ideas.

• Identify relations between different facts/ideas; make comparisons, point out contrasts and draw analogies as appropriate.
• Give your evidence, and weigh it up, pointing out any flaws or ambiguities in it.
• Try to keep every sentence you write relevant to the overall direction of your essay. This is very hard at first, but it gets easier with practice.

4.2.4 Tips on style

• Avoid the use of ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’ etc.
• Use appropriate terms and linguistic structures to signal the stages in your argument, for example, ‘however’, ‘despite the fact that’, ‘an additional example is’, and so on. This is called signposting, and helps your reader to follow your reasoning processes.
• You will not be expected to write like a professor in your discipline after only a year or two studying it in higher education, so do not worry if your essays do not read like your text books or journal articles. However, you should be trying to use the appropriate vocabulary: it may be helpful to start a checklist of the words associated with a certain topic, together with short definitions.
• Writing a good academic essay will probably require you to learn a new way of presenting information. The important thing is that you are clear, relevant, and don’t make generalisations you cannot support, either with quotations or with other evidence. You should also look at the relevant section in the departmental handbook on referencing.

4.2.5 What do markers look for?

Many students do not have much idea what markers are looking for in answers. Broad criteria are given below;
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A third</td>
<td>A grasp of the basic issues demonstrated; attempt to relate the material to the essay question; largely descriptive but some evidence of reading; some understanding of relevant theory, but perhaps some main points missed out, or interpreted inaccurately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 (Lower second class)</td>
<td>A good description of the topic, perhaps without much analysis or critical thinking; an adequate structure; an evaluative conclusion; question analysed and most material relevant to the question; use of some appropriate theoretical model/s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 (Upper second class)</td>
<td>Demonstration of knowledge across substantive areas and fluent use of theory and concepts; evidence of background knowledge and reading; sound structure and cohesive (a good ‘flow’); some critical evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A first</td>
<td>As well as a good grasp of all the relevant facts and analysis / critical thinking (as described for 2.1), a first class essay puts ideas into a context, can be self-evaluative and self-critical, and will have some original thinking in it. It will be very clearly structured and completely relevant to the question.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main difference is between the ability to ‘regurgitate’ information (which probably will not earn you above a 2.2), and the ability to analyse your knowledge, to put it into context, and to see the implications of your argument (which are the expectations of a piece of work gaining a 2.1 or a 1st).

### 4.2.6 Self-assessment sheet

Self-analysis and self-assessment is the best – perhaps really the only - way to improve your work. The checklist below is for your personal use; you do not have to show it to anyone else.

#### Checklist for essay self-assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Background reading</td>
<td>☐ Proof reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Understanding of topic</td>
<td>☐ Sentence structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further reading

K. Williams, Writing Essays (Oxford: Oxford Brookes, 1995)
E. Chambers and A. Northedge, The Arts Good Study Guide
(Milton Keynes: Open University, 1997)

5. Personal Advisor Sessions

Autumn Term (2016/17)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Type of Session</th>
<th>Provisional Topics</th>
<th>Session Leader</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>w/c 26th September 2016</td>
<td>Personal Adviser One-to-One Session</td>
<td>Managing Your Workload</td>
<td>4.3 Personal Adviser</td>
<td>Personal Adviser’s Office</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.4

4.5 Outline of Second Year Personal Adviser Sessions

26th September 2016: Managing Your Workload

As second year students you will find your workload has increased and that there will be different expectations from you in terms of academic performance. This session is an opportunity for you to discuss with your Personal Adviser strategies to deal with some of the challenges of studying at a more advanced level.

9th January 2017: Progress Review

The final meeting of the term with your personal tutor will be a personal progress review. You should come to this meeting with a selection of marked essays and feedback sheets so that you can discuss your progress. Before the meeting with your personal tutor, it would be useful for you to re-read the feedback you have received on your essays so far in order to determine whether markers are highlighting similar points – if so it would be useful for you to prioritize focusing on these. During this meeting, your personal tutor will ask you how you have found the first term and whether you have set yourself any particular areas to develop for the next term. These will depend on you and your progress to date but might include essay writing, referencing or managing your workload, for example.

13th March 2017: Planning For Your Final Year

The final year is crucial to a student’s final achievement and future employability and it is important therefore to start planning how to
make the best of the final year. This session with your personal adviser will focus on your chosen modules and what you need to do to prepare for study and also any areas of academic weakness and how these could be improved.